The New Criterion

June 2004

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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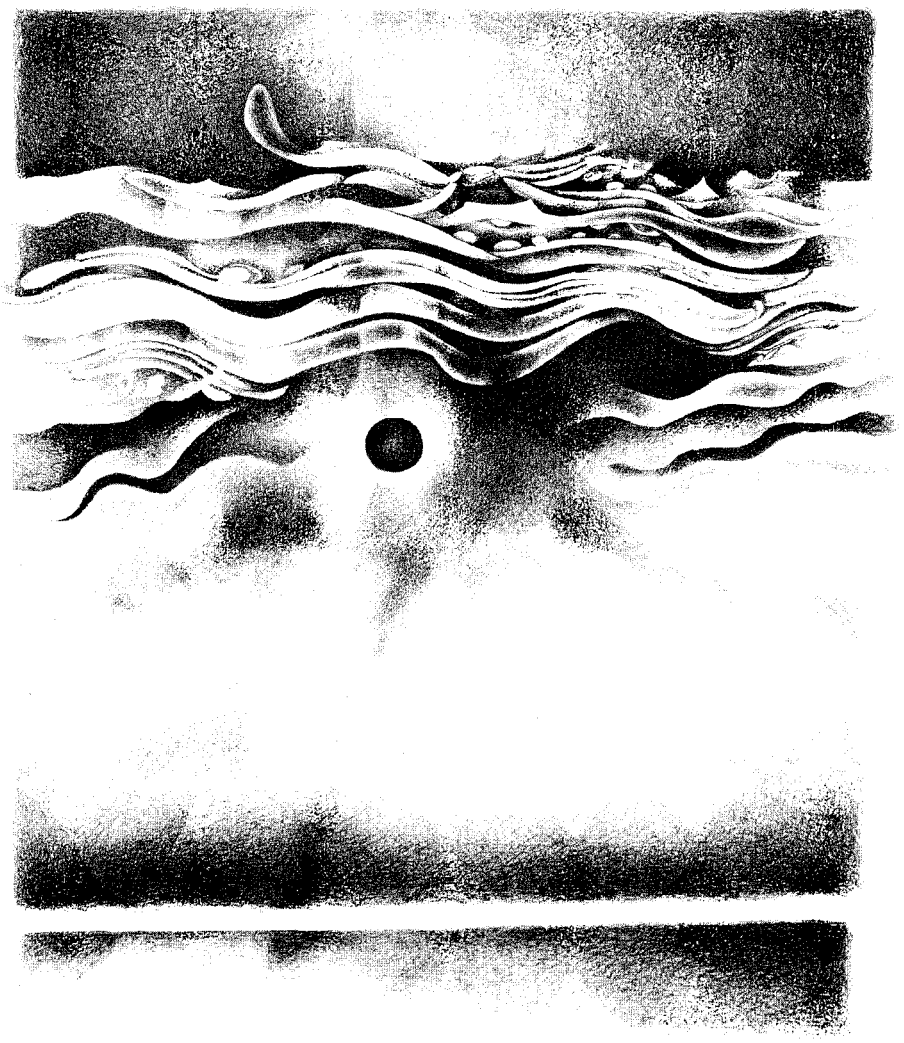

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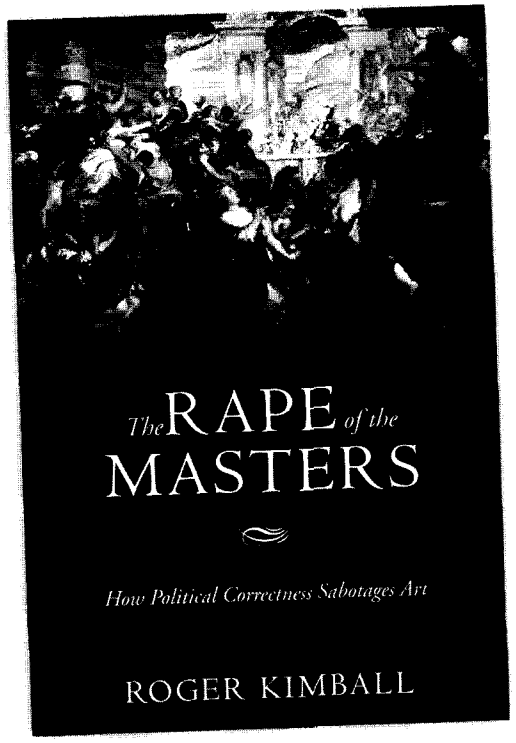

Colleges and universities used to teach art history to encourage connoisseurship and acquaint students with the riches of our artistic heritage. But, as Roger Kimball shows in this witty and provocative book, today's students are less likely to learn about the aesthetics of master works than be told, for instance, that Peter Paul Rubens's great painting "Drunken Silenus" is an allegory about rape; or that Jan van Eyck's masterful Arnolfini Portrait is about "middle-class deceptions... and the treatment of women;" or that Winslow Homer's "The Gulf Stream" is "a visual encoding of racism."

In *The Rape of the Masters: How Political Correctness Sabotages Art*, Kimball, a noted art critic himself, shows how academic art history is increasingly held hostage to radical cultural politics—feminism, cultural studies, post-colonial studies, the whole armory of academic anti-humanism. To make his point, Kimball shows how eight famous works of art—all of them reproduced in the book—have been interpreted by contemporary art historians to fit a radical ideological fantasy. Then, in his own exemplary analysis of these great works in which aesthetics, not politics, guides the discussion, Kimball shows how each of these paintings should properly be understood.

The Rape of the Masters exposes the charlatanry that fuels much academic art history and oozes into the art world generally. It also provides an engaging antidote to the tendentious, politically motivated assaults on our treasured sources of culture and civilization that take place in today's universities, museums, and art galleries.

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The New Criterion *June 2004*

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Notes & Comments: June 2004

Pursuing moral equivalence

Whatever else can be said about the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison, the forces arrayed against the U.S.-led coalition have welcomed the episode as a bonanza. Which forces? We don't mean the vaunted "Arab street"—everyone is still waiting for that Godot—but rather the phalanx commanded by *The New York Times*, CNN, the BBC, *Newsweek*, and their satellites and support staff. The kingdom of the fourth estate contracted in one brow of grateful outrage and titillated horror as the photographs of naked Iraqis decorated the nightly news and front pages of newspapers everywhere. "The prisoner scandal has shattered U.S. credibility in Iraq and the Arab world," Reuters crowed, "as well as dented President Bush's re-election expectations in November elections."

Perhaps. But we recall that it was Steven Jukes, the head of global news at Reuters, who decided shortly after 9/11 that his distinguished news agency should nix the word "terrorist," at least when it came to Arabs blowing up American property or murdering people. "We all know," Mr. Jukes wrote, "that one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter and that Reuters upholds the principle that we do not use the word terrorist."

Right. How . . . punctilious. We thought about Mr. Jukes's linguistic scruples as we watched the press dither about how best to describe the mistreatment of Iraqi prisoners. "Humiliation"—probably the most accurate term—made a brief appearance. But it was quickly retired because it didn't make the perpetrators look bad enough. The lackluster "mistreatment" made a brief showing, as did "abuse," especially in the phrase "sadistic abuse." But after a few weeks the clear favorite was "torture." After all, everyone knows Saddam tortured hundreds of thousands of people. So when a handful of low-lifes mistreat their charges, the media calls it torture, thus insinuating the desired moral equivalence between Saddam's thugs and the U.S. army.

Of course, they don't say that it was only a handful of low-lifes perpetrating the outrages. And they certainly don't dwell on the difference between feeding people into a plastic shredder and sexual humiliation. Indeed, when other news—the videotaped decapitation of Nick Berg, for example—threatens to displace the story, they redouble their efforts. If we are Seymour Hersh, we write a story for *The New Yorker* attempting to implicate the Secretary of Defense in the episode. Hersh opened his essay with the claim that

> The roots of the Abu Ghraib prison scandal lie not in the criminal inclinations of a few Army reservists but in a decision, approved last year

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by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, to expand a highly secret operation, which had been focussed on the hunt for Al Qaeda, to the interrogation of prisoners in Iraq.

The New Yorker published Hersh's essay under the rubric "Fact." But is it factual? According to a Pentagon spokesman, Hersh's claims are "outlandish, conspiratorial, and filled with error and anonymous conjecture." But then outlandish, conspiratorial, and error-filled conjecture is familiar territory for Seymour Hersh. A commentator at the website RealClearPolitics recalled the essay Hersh published in *The New Yorker* last March, about a week into the war with Iraq.

> "It's a stalemate now," the former intelligence official told me. "It's going to remain one only if we can maintain our supply lines. The carriers are going to run out of JDAMS." Much of the supply of Tomahawk guided missiles has been expended. "The Marines are worried as hell, they're all committed, with no reserves, and they've never run the LAVS"—light armored vehicles—"as long and as hard" as they have in Iraq. . . . "The only hope is that they can hold out until reinforcements come."
>
> The 4th Infantry Division—the Army's most modern mechanized division—whose equipment spent weeks waiting in the Mediterranean before being diverted to the overtaxed American port in Kuwait, is not expected to be operational until the end of April. . . . "All we have now is front-line positions," the former intelligence official told me. "Everything else is missing."
>
> Last week, plans for an assault on Baghdad had stalled, and the six Republican Guard divisions expected to provide the main Iraqi defense had yet to have a significant engagement with American or British soldiers. The shortages forced Central Command to "run around looking for supplies," the former intelligence official said.

Hersh's piece was published about a week before U.S. forces rolled into Baghdad in one of the swiftest, least bloody, and most brilliantly coordinated military assaults in history. You see why his informant is a "*former* intelligence officer." We hope he has found a more appropriate line of endeavor.

Seymour Hersh's fantasy about Donald Rumsfeld's collusion in the abuse of Iraqi prisoners is not the only piece of journalism misidentified as fact. As the scandal heated up, the appetite for publishing incriminating photographs outstripped the supply—well, it outstripped the supply of *authentic* photographs. No problem. *The Daily Mirror*, a rabidly anti-American British tabloid, published faked photographs of members of the Queen's Lancashire Regiment abusing prisoners. When the fake was exposed, Piers Morgan, the *Mirror*'s editor, tried to shrug it off. When he refused to resign, he was sacked.

They do things differently in Boston. When it was revealed that *The Boston Globe* (which, incidentally, is owned by *The New York Times*) published a photograph erroneously described as depicting sexual abuse in Iraq, it was put down as a "miscommunication among staffers" and "a breakdown of checks and balances." "We are not firing anybody," said Martin Baron, the *Globe*'s editor. The *Globe*'s ombudsman rebuked the paper but went on to say that the idea that publication of the faked photograph provided evidence of the paper's anti-Americanism or desire to "bring down Bush" was "off the mark." Was it? Had they exercised normal editorial caution, the *Mirror* and the *Globe* would have checked up on those photographs; they would have discovered they were fakes. But they didn't exercise normal editorial caution. Why? Mark Steyn got it exactly right:

> Because they wanted them to be true. Because it would bring them a little closer to the head they really want to roll—George W. Bush's. If you want to see what the Islamists did to Nick Berg or Daniel Pearl or to those guys in Fallujah or even to the victims of Sept. 11, you'll have to ferret it out on the Internet. The media aren't interested in showing you images

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> that might rouse the American people to righteous anger, only images that will shame and demoralize them.

Yes, what happened at Abu Ghraib was deplorable. U.S. officials, beginning with the President, have publicly apologized. Even as we write, the perpetrators are being court-martialed. The army has instituted new safeguards to make sure that there is no repetition of the abuse. And what about the chaps who incinerated those four contractors in Fallujah? Or the people responsible for hacking off Nick Berg's head on videotape? Or the men who murdered Fabrizio Quattrocchi in April? Film of that episode was "too graphic" even for al-Jazeera to air. But who has time for those details when the effort to impugn America is going strong?

Melvin J. Lasky, 1920–2004

It is with sadness that we report the passing of Melvin J. Lasky, prolific author, ardent anti-Communist, indefatigable and much beloved editor. A native New Yorker, Mel was graduated from City College in New York in the same class as Irving Kristol and Seymour Martin Lipset. He was posted to Berlin in World War II, and it was there that he made his early career, starting the magazine *Der Monat* (The Month) soon after the war ended.

Der Monat was one of several magazines funded by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an organization created by more than one hundred European and American intellectuals in 1950 to wage war—a war of ideas—against Stalinism and totalitarian ideology. The Congress was a liberal organization, but one uncorrupted by the virus of Communist fellow-traveling. Mel had a distinguished career in Berlin editing *Der Monat*, but he really came into his own when he moved to London in the late Fifties to take over the co-editorship (with Stephen Spender) of the monthly magazine *Encounter*, another initiative of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Mel's predecessor had been Irving Kristol, who made *Encounter* one of the most influential cultural reviews in English. Mel extended and built upon the foundation laid down by Kristol. The magazine's roster of contributors is an intellectual and literary *Who's Who* of extraordinary breadth and distinction. A partial list includes Thomas Mann, T. S. Eliot, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Bertrand Russell, George Orwell, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, Boris Pasternak, William Faulkner, Arthur Koestler, and W. H. Auden. As Ferdinand Mount, the former editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, noted, *Encounter* was amazingly catholic, open to just about every sort of writer with the exception of "Soviet hacks."

Mel did not suffer from writer's block. While editing *Encounter* he managed to write a shelf full of historical-political works, including *The Hungarian Revolution* (1957), a travel book called *Africa for Beginners* (1963), and his magnum opus, *Utopia and Revolution* (1977). Writing about Mel in 1985, Sidney Hook noted his "extraordinary intellectual and moral courage. I refer," Hook wrote,

> not merely to the kind of courage expressed in an article or esoteric writing that will bring down on him the wrath of other writers or scholars or the hired literary guns of the Kremlin and its satellites, but to the courage displayed in a public confrontation with a hostile crowd.

Mel had ample opportunity to display that courage in 1967 when it was revealed that a large part of the funding for the Congress for Cultural Freedom, and hence for *Encounter*, came from the CIA. The revelation could not have come at a worse moment. Anti-establishment and anti-American sentiment were boiling over across Europe and America (*plus ça change . . .*). The fact that *Encounter*, far from being conservative, was an audaciously liberal, albeit anti-totalitarian, organ mattered not a whit. Overnight, readers and authors fled from the magazine. Mel's efforts to salvage and re-

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constitute *Encounter* over the next decade or so were indeed courageous. Although the magazine never quite regained its cachet, it did retain its wide-ranging intellectual verve. *Encounter* had struggled financially for many years. Finally, in 1991, it closed. It was the end of an era. Nothing even remotely approaching *Encounter*'s intellectual seriousness and range has appeared in England to take its place.

Anyone who got to know Mel Lasky would soon be the recipient of his consummately illegible notes, enthusiastic jewels of criticism, exhortation, and commendation hurriedly scribbled on *Encounter* notepaper. No one we know ever managed to decipher any of these gnomic communications completely, but, like us, many will be saddened to realize that no more such missives are forthcoming.

Some words of thanks

In 1923, early in the career of *The Criterion*, T. S. Eliot wrote that

> it is the function of a literary review to maintain the autonomy and disinterestedness of literature, and at the same time to exhibit the relations of literature—not to "life," as something contrasted to literature, but to all the other activities, which, together with literature, are the components of life.

Eliot noted that the focus of such a review would be "not merely on literature, but on what we suppose to be the interests of any intelligent person with literary taste," that is to say, on the realm of culture writ large. Eliot's dual ambition—to protect the native freedom of art and culture while at the same time fostering their manifold attachments and responsibilities—has also always been at the center of our ambition at *The New Criterion*.

Today, as in the Twenties, this work of culture is a speciality enterprise, indispensable to the pulse of independent criticism but impossible without the collaboration of readers who support the vocation of culture. *The New Criterion* has always been fortunate in its supporters, and, as we complete our twenty-second year of publication, we would like to salute all those who have made our endeavors possible. The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, the John M. Olin Foundation, and the Sarah Scaife Foundation form the triumvirate that has sustained *The New Criterion* since its inception. Without their steadfast support, the *The New Criterion* would simply not have been possible. The Olin Foundation will soon be closing its doors, and we would like to take this opportunity to thank the Foundation's Trustees and its Executive Director, James Piereson, for their friendship and support over the course of more than two decades. Visionaries at the Olin Foundation helped to create *The New Criterion* in 1982; their successors helped to nurture it for almost a quarter century.

The passing of the Olin Foundation will have a profound effect on American cultural life. Together with the Bradley and Scaife Foundations, the Olin Foundation has been that rarest of rare institutions: an essential supporter of conservative initiatives in the realm of culture and ideas. As of this writing, no individual or institution has stepped forward to take its place. The end of the Olin Foundation would probably have meant the end of *The New Criterion* were it not for two critical intercessions. One was the formation of the Friends of *The New Criterion*, a group that over the past few years has grown to become an integral part of our activities. We would like to thank all of our Friends, in particular those who helped us with special events over the course of this past year. The second intercession is the work of Donald Kahn, a man whose philanthropic activities have sustained many important cultural institutions, including *The New Criterion*. We are immensely grateful for Mr. Kahn's long-term friendship and support. He has made it possible for us to forge ahead with the best cultural review in English.

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Lengthened shadows: X

Institutionalizing our demise: America vs. multiculturalism

by Roger Kimball

Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world.
—J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer*, 1782

The one absolutely certain way of bringing this nation to ruin . . . would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities.
—Theodore Roosevelt, *Autobiography*, 1913

Democratic civilization is the first in history to blame itself because another power is trying to destroy it.
—Jean-François Revel, 1970

The delicate task that faces our civilization today is not to reform the secular, rationalist orthodoxy, which has passed beyond the point of redemption. Rather, it is to breathe new life into the older, now largely comatose, religious orthodoxies—while resisting the counterculture as best we can, adapting to it and reshaping it where we cannot simply resist.
—Irving Kristol, "Countercultures," 1994

On a recent trip to Maryland, I stopped at Baltimore Harbor with my wife and five-year-old son to see Fort McHenry, the site, in September 1814, of the Battle of Baltimore, a decisive episode in the War of 1812. It was a glorious spring day: the sky an infinite azure unfolded by the immaculate incandescence of the sun; gentle sea breezes wafted the scents of burgeoning flora to us grateful visitors as a scattering of sloops scudded in silent decorum across the bay.

Our first stop was a modern outbuilding adjacent to the eighteenth-century fort. We crowded into a small theater with about thirty fourth-graders and their teachers to watch a short film. Among other things, we learned about the origins of the war, about how the British took and burned Washington, about how at last a thousand U.S. troops under George Armistead at Fort McHenry successfully defended their bastion against the British naval onslaught, saving Baltimore and turning the tide of the war.

It was a near-run thing. The British ships, anchored out of range of Armistead's cannons, pounded the fort with mortar and Congreve rocket fire over the course of twenty-five hours. Sitting on a truce ship behind the British fleet was a young American lawyer and amateur poet named Francis Scott Key. He watched as the battle raged, dappling the night sky with noisy phosphorescence.

Sometime before sunrise, the bombardment suddenly stopped. Key was uncertain of the battle's outcome until dawn broke and he saw the American flag fluttering boldly above Fort McHenry. (When he had taken command, Armistead asked for an extra large flag so that "the British would have no trouble seeing it from a distance.") There would be no surrender. The Brits abandoned their plans to invade Baltimore. The war

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would soon be over. As soon as he caught sight of Old Glory, Francis Scott Key began scribbling what would become "The Star-Spangled Banner" on the back of a letter. He finished it in a hotel in Baltimore a day or two later. The poem was an instant hit and was soon set to an eighteenth-century English drinking tune. It became the official national anthem in 1931.

The film ended and strains of the song began floating out from the loudspeakers—softly at first, then louder and louder. Everyone in the room scrambled to his feet.

> O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave
> O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

The schoolchildren stood reverently, each with his right hand over his heart. A floor-length curtain wheeled back, flooding the room with light. There was Fort McHenry. And there, rising above it, was the American flag, waving gently in the breeze. With the possible exception of our son, who was busy attacking The Enemy with his toy F14, there wasn't a dry eye in the house.

Of course, that calculated piece of theater was in part an exercise in sentimentality. Is that a bad thing? I believe that there is a place for such affirmative sentimentality. Among other things, it provides emotional glue for our shared identity as Americans. These days, perhaps more than ever before, that identity needs glue. As we contemplate the prospects for America and its institutions in the twenty-first century, it is not only particular cultural and social institutions that deserve scrutiny. What we might call the institution of American identity—of who we are as a people—also requires our attention.

It is often said that the terrorist attacks of September 11 precipitated a new resolve throughout the nation. There is some truth to that. Certainly, the extraordinary bravery of the firefighters and other rescue personnel in New York and Washington, D.C., provided an invigorating spectacle—as did Todd "Let's roll" Beamer and his fellow passengers on United Airlines Flight 93. Having learned from their cell phones what had happened at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, they rushed and overpowered the terrorists who had hijacked their plane. As a result, the plane crashed on a remote Pennsylvania farm instead of on Pennsylvania Avenue. Who knows how many lives their sacrifice saved?

The widespread sense of condign outrage—of horror leavened by anger and elevated by resolve—testified to a renewed sense of national purpose and identity after 9/11. Attacked, many Americans suddenly (if temporarily) rediscovered the virtue of patriotism. At the beginning of his remarkable book *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity*,[1] the Harvard political scientist Samuel Huntington tells about a certain block on Charles Street in Boston. At one time, American flags flew in front of a U.S. Post Office and a liquor store. At some point, the Post Office stopped displaying the flag, so on September 11, 2001, the flag flew only in front of the liquor store. Within two weeks, seventeen American flags decorated that block of Charles Street, in addition to a huge flag suspended over the street close by. "With their country under attack," Huntington notes, "Charles Street denizens rediscovered their nation and identified themselves with it."

Was that rediscovery anything more than a momentary passion? Huntington reports that within a few months, the flags on Charles Street began to disappear. By the time the first anniversary rolled around in September 2002, only four were left flying. True, that is four times more than were there on September 10, 2001, but it is less than a quarter of the number that populated Charles Street at the end of September 2001.

There are similar anecdotes from around the country—an access of flag-waving fol-

1 *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* by Samuel P. Huntington; Simon and Schuster, 428 pages, $27.

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lowed by a relapse into indifference. Does it mean that the sudden upsurge of patriotism in the weeks following 9/11 was only, as it were, skin deep? Or perhaps it merely testifies to the fact that a sense of permanent emergency is difficult to maintain, especially in the absence of fresh attacks. Is our sense of ourselves as Americans patent only when challenged? "Does it," Huntington asks, "take an Osama bin Laden . . . to make us realize that we are Americans? If we do not experience recurring destructive attacks, will we return to the fragmentation and eroded Americanism before September 11?"

One hopes that the answer is No. The behavior of those schoolchildren at Fort McHenry—behavior that was, I am happy to report, quietly encouraged by their teachers—suggests that the answer cannot simply be No. But I fear that for every schoolchild standing at attention for the National Anthem, there is a teacher or lawyer or judge or politician or ACLU employee militating against the hegemony of the dominant culture, the insupportable intrusion of white, Christian, "Eurocentric" values into the curriculum, the school pageant, the town green, etc., etc. The demonstration of national character and resolve following September 11 was extraordinary. It did not, however, purchase immunity from the virus of cultural dissolution. The usually perceptive commentator Max Boot, writing about the issue of gay marriage, remarked in passing that "no one who saw the response to 9/11 can think we are soft or decadent" or that "America is in cultural decline." Alas, the display of national heroism and resolve following 9/11 has had little if any effect on the forces behind the fragmentation and "eroded Americanism" to which Huntington refers.

Those forces are not isolated phenomena; they are not even confined to America. They are part of a global crisis in national identity, coefficients of the sudden collapse of self-confidence in the West—a collapse that shows itself in everything from swiftly falling birthrates in "old Europe" to the attack on the whole idea of the sovereign nation state. It is hard to avoid thinking that a people that has lost the will to reproduce or govern itself is a people on the road to destruction.

Only a few years ago we were invited to contemplate the pleasant spectacle of the "end of history" and the establishment of Western-style liberal democracy the world over. Things look rather different now as a variety of centrifugal forces threatens to undermine the sources of national identity and, with it, the sources of national strength and the security which that strength underwrites.

The threat shows itself in many ways, from culpable complacency to the corrosive imperatives of "multiculturalism" and political correctness. (I use scare quotes because what generally travels under the name of "multiculturalism" is really a form of mono-cultural animus directed against the dominant culture.) In essence, as Huntington notes, multiculturalism is "anti-European civilization. . . . It is basically an anti-Western ideology." The multiculturalists claim to be fostering a progressive cultural cosmopolitanism distinguished by superior sensitivity to the downtrodden and dispossessed. In fact, they encourage an orgy of self-flagellating liberal guilt as impotent as it is insatiable. The "sensitivity" of the multiculturalist is an index not of moral refinement but of moral vacuousness. As the French essayist Pascal Bruckner observed, "An overblown conscience is an empty conscience."

> Compassion ceases if there is nothing but compassion, and revulsion turns to insensitivity. Our "soft pity," as Stefan Zweig calls it, is stimulated, because guilt is a convenient substitute for action where action is impossible. Without the power to do anything, sensitivity becomes our main aim, the aim is not so much to do anything, as to be judged. Salvation lies in the verdict that declares us to be wrong.

Multiculturalism is a moral intoxicant; its thrill centers around the emotion of supe-

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rior virtue; its hangover subsists on a diet of nescience and blighted "good intentions."

Wherever the imperatives of multiculturalism have touched the curriculum, they have left broad swaths of anti-Western attitudinizing competing for attention with quite astonishing historical blindness. Courses on minorities, women's issues, the Third World proliferate; the teaching of mainstream history slides into oblivion. "The mood," Arthur Schlesinger wrote in *The Disuniting of America* (1992), his excellent book on the depredations of multiculturalism, "is one of divesting Americans of the sinful European inheritance and seeking redemptive infusions from non-Western cultures."

A profound ignorance of the milestones of American culture is the predictable result of this mood. The statistics have become proverbial. Huntington quotes one poll from the 1990s showing that while 90 percent of Ivy League students could identify Rosa Parks, only 25 percent could identify the author of the words "government of the people, by the people, for the people." In a 1999 survey, 40 percent of seniors at fifty-five top colleges could not say within half a century when the Civil War was fought.

It is hard to avoid thinking that a people that has lost the will to reproduce or govern itself is a people on the road to destruction.

Another study found that more high school students knew who Harriet Tubman was than knew that Washington commanded the American army in the revolution or that Abraham Lincoln wrote the Emancipation Proclamation. Doubtless you have your own favorite horror story.

But multiculturalism is not only an academic phenomenon. The attitudes it fosters have profound social as well as intellectual consequences. One consequence has been a sharp rise in the phenomenon of immigration without—or with only partial—assimilation: a dangerous demographic trend that threatens American identity in the most basic way. These various agents of dissolution are also elements in a wider culture war: the contest to define how we live and what counts as the good in the good life. Anti-Americanism occupies such a prominent place on the agenda of the culture wars precisely because the traditional values of American identity—articulated by the Founders and grounded in a commitment to individual liberty and public virtue—are deeply at odds with the radical, de-civilizing tenets of the "multiculturalist" enterprise.

To get a sense of what has happened to the institution of American identity, compare Robert Frost's performance at John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961 with Maya Angelou's performance thirty-two years later. As Huntington reminds us, Frost spoke of the "heroic deeds" of America's founding, an event, he said, that with God's "approval" ushered in "a new order of the ages." By contrast, Maya Angelou never mentioned the words "America" or "American." Instead, she identified twenty-seven ethnic or religious groups that had suffered repression because of America's "armed struggles for profit," "cynicism," and "brutishness."

Repellent though Maya Angelou's performance was, it did seem the appropriate rhetorical embroidery to welcome Bill Clinton, a president infatuated with the blandishments of multiculturalism and who sought a third "great revolution" to emancipate America from the legacy of European civilization and its Anglo-Protestant values. It has to be acknowledged that considerable progress toward that goal was made during his administration.

A favorite weapon in the armory of multiculturalism is the lowly hyphen. When we speak of an African-American or Mexican-American or Asian-American these days, the aim is not descriptive but deconstructive. There is a polemical edge to it, a provocation. The hyphen does not mean "American,

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but hailing at some point in the past from someplace else." It means "only provisionally American: my allegiance is divided at best." (I believe something similar can be said about the feminist fad for hyphenating the bride's maiden name with her husband's surname. It is a gesture of independence that is also a declaration of divided loyalty.) It is curious to what extent the passion for hyphenation is fostered more by the liberal elite than the populations it is supposedly meant to serve. How does it serve them? Presumably by enhancing their sense of "self-esteem." Frederick Douglass saw through this charade some one hundred and fifty years ago. "No one idea," he wrote, "has given rise to more oppression and persecution toward colored people of this country than that which makes Africa, not America, their home."

The indispensable Ward Connerly would agree. Connerly has campaigned vigorously against affirmative action in California. This of course has made him a pariah among the politically correct elite. It has also resulted in some humorous exchanges, such as this telephone interview with a reporter from *The New York Times* in 1997.

> Reporter: What are you?
> Connerly: I am an American.
> Reporter: No, no, no! What *are* you?
> Connerly: Yes, yes, yes! I am an American.
> Reporter: That is not what I mean. I was told that you are African American. Are you ashamed to be African American?
> Connerly: No, I am just proud to be an American.

Connerly went on to explain that his ancestry included Africans, French, Irish, and American Indians. It was too much for the poor reporter from our Paper of Record: "What does that make you?" he asked in uncomprehending exasperation. I suspect he was not edified by Connerly's cheerful response: "That makes me all-American."

The multicultural passion for hyphenation is not simply a fondness for syntactical novelty. It also bespeaks a commitment to the centrifugal force of anti-American tribalism. The division marked by the hyphen in African-American (say) denotes a political stand. It goes hand-in-hand with other items on the index of liberal desiderata—the redistributive impulse behind efforts at "affirmative action," for example. Affirmative action was undertaken in the name of equality. But, as always seems to happen, it soon fell prey to the Orwellian logic from which the principle that "All animals are equal" gives birth to the transformative codicil: "but some animals are more equal than others."

Affirmative action is Orwellian in a linguistic sense, too, since what announces itself as an initiative to promote equality winds up enforcing discrimination precisely on the grounds that it was meant to overcome. Thus we are treated to the delicious, if alarming, contradiction of college applications that declare their commitment to evaluate candidates "without regard to race, gender, religion, ethnicity, or national origin" on page 1 and then helpfully inform you on page 2 that it is to your advantage to mention if you belong to any of the following designated victim groups. Among other things, a commitment to multiculturalism seems to dull one's sense of contradiction.

The whole history of affirmative action is instinct with that irony. What began as a Presidential Executive Order in 1961 directing government contractors to take "affirmative action" to assure that people be hired "without regard" for sex, race, creed, color, etc., has resulted in the creation of vast bureaucracies dedicated to discovering, hiring, and advancing people chiefly on the basis of those qualities. White is black, freedom is slavery, "without regard" comes to mean "with regard for nothing else."

Had he lived to see the evolution of affirmative action, Tocqueville would have put such developments down as examples of how in democratic societies the passion for equality tends to trump the passion for liberty. The fact that the effort to enforce equality often results in egregious ine-

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qualities he would have understood to be part of the "tutelary despotism" that "extends its arms over society as a whole; it covers its surface with a network of small, complicated, painstaking, uniform rules through which the most original minds and the most vigorous souls cannot clear a way to surpass the crowd."

Multiculturalism and "affirmative action" are allies in the assault on the institution of American identity. As such, they oppose the traditional understanding of what it means to be an American—an understanding hinted at in 1782 by the French-born American farmer J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in his famous image of America as a country in which "individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men." This crucible of American identity, this "melting pot," has two aspects. The negative aspect involves disassociating oneself from the cultural imperatives of one's country of origin. One sheds a previous identity before assuming a new one. One might preserve certain local habits and tastes, but they are essentially window-dressing. In essence one has left the past behind in order to become an American citizen.

The positive aspect of advancing the melting pot involves embracing the substance of American culture. The 1795 code for citizenship lays out some of the formal requirements.

> I do solemnly swear (1) to support the Constitution of the United States; (2) to renounce and abjure absolutely and entirely all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty of whom or which the applicant was before a subject or citizen; (3) to support and defend the Constitution and the laws of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; (4) to bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and (5) (A) to bear arms on behalf of the United States when required by law, or (B) to perform noncombatant service in the Armed Forces of the United States when required by law . . .

For over two hundred years, this oath had been required of those wishing to become citizens. In 2003, Huntington tells us, federal bureaucrats launched a campaign to rewrite and weaken it.

I shall say more about what constitutes the substance of American identity in a moment. For now, I want to underscore the fact that this project of Americanization has been an abiding concern since the time of the Founders. "We must see our people more Americanized," John Jay declared in the 1780s. Jefferson concurred. Teddy Roosevelt repeatedly championed the idea that American culture, the "crucible in which all the new types are melted into one," was "shaped from 1776 to 1789, and our nationality was definitely fixed in all its essentials by the men of Washington's day."

It is often said that America is a nation of immigrants. In fact, as Huntington points out, America is a country that was initially a country of *settlers*. Settlers precede immigrants and make their immigration possible. The culture of those mostly English-speaking, predominantly Anglo-Protestant settlers defined American culture. Their efforts came to fruition with the generation of Franklin, Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison. The Founders are so denominated because they founded, they inaugurated a state. Immigrants were those who came later, who came from elsewhere, and who became American by embracing the Anglophone culture of the original settlers. The English language, the rule of law, respect for individual rights, the industriousness and piety that flowed from the Protestant work ethic—these were central elements in the culture disseminated by the Founders. And these were among the qualities embraced by immigrants when they became Americans. "Throughout American history," Huntington notes, "people who were not white Anglo-Saxon Protestants have become Americans by adopting America's Anglo-Protestant culture and political values. This benefitted them and the country."

Justice Louis Brandeis outlined the pat-

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tern in 1919. Americanization, he said, means that the immigrant "adopts the clothes, the manners, and the customs generally prevailing here . . . substitutes for his mother tongue the English language" and comes "into complete harmony with our ideals and aspirations and cooperate[s] with us for their attainment." Until the 1960s, the Brandeis model mostly prevailed. Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish groups, understanding that assimilation was the best ticket to stability and social and economic success, eagerly aided in the task of integrating their charges into American society.

The story is very different today. In America, there is a dangerous new tide of immigration from Asia, a variety of Muslim countries, and Latin America, especially from Mexico. The tide is new not only chronologically but also in substance. First, there is the sheer matter of numbers. More than 2,200,000 legal immigrants came to the U.S. from Mexico in the 1990s alone.

The traditional ideal of a distinctive American identity, forged out of many elements but unified around a core of beliefs, attitudes, and commitments is now up for grabs.

The number of illegal Mexican immigrants is staggering. So is their birth rate. Altogether there are more than 8 million Mexicans in the U.S. Some parts of the Southwest are well on their way to becoming what Victor Davis Hanson calls "Mexifornia," "the strange society that is emerging as the result of a demographic and cultural revolution like no other in our times." A professor at the University of New Mexico predicts that by 2080 parts of the Southwest United States and Northern Mexico will join to form a new country, "La Republica del Norte."

The problem is not only one of numbers, though. Earlier immigrants made—and were helped and goaded by the ambient culture to make—concerted efforts to assimilate. Important pockets of these new immigrants are not assimilating, not learning English, not becoming or thinking of themselves primarily as Americans. The effect of these developments on American identity is disastrous and potentially irreversible.

Such developments are abetted by the liberal political and educational elites of this country, whose dominant theme is the perfidy of traditional American values. Hence the passion for multiculturalism and the ideal of ethnic hyphenation that goes with it. This has done immense damage in schools and colleges as well as in the population at large. By removing the obligation to master English, multiculturalism condemns whole sub-populations to the status of permanent second-class citizens. By removing the obligation to adopt American values, it fosters what Hermann Broch calls a "value vacuum," a sense of existential emptiness that breeds anomie and the pathologies of nihilism.

As if in revenge for this injustice, however, multiculturalism also weakens the social bonds of the community at large. The price of imperfect assimilation is imperfect loyalty. Take the movement for bilingualism. Whatever it intended in theory, in practice it means *not* mastering English. It has notoriously left its supposed beneficiaries essentially monolingual, often semi-lingual. The only *bi* involved is a passion for bifurcation, which is fed by the accumulated resentments instilled by the anti-American multicultural orthodoxy. Every time you call directory assistance or some large corporation and are told "Press One for English" and "Para español oprime el numero dos" it is another small setback for American identity.

Meanwhile, many prominent academics and even businessmen come bearing the gospel of what John Fonte has dubbed "transnational progressivism"—an anti-patriotic stew of politically correct ideas and attitudes distinguished partly by its pen-

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chant for vague but virtuous-sounding abstractions, partly by its moral smugness. It is a familiar litany. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum warns that "patriotic pride" is "morally dangerous" while Princeton's Amy Gutmann reveals that she finds it "repugnant" for American students to learn that they are "above all, citizens of the United States" instead of partisans of her preferred abstraction, "democratic humanism." New York University's Richard Sennett denounces "the evil of a shared national identity" and concludes that the erosion of national sovereignty is "basically a positive thing." Cecilia O'Leary of American University identifies American patriotism as a right-wing, militaristic, male, white, Anglo, and repressive force while Peter Spiro of Hofstra University says it "is increasingly difficult to use the word 'we' in the context of international affairs."

Of course, whenever the word "patriotism" comes up in left-wing circles, there is sure to be some allusion to Samuel Johnson's observation that "patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels." Right on cue, George Lipsitz of the University of California sniffs that "in recent years refuge in patriotism has been the first resort of scoundrels of all sorts." Naturally, Dr. Johnson's explanation to Boswell that he did not mean to disparage "a real and generous love of our country" but only that "pretended patriotism" that is a "cloak for self-interest" is left out of account.

The bottom line is that the traditional ideal of a distinctive American identity, forged out of many elements but unified around a core of beliefs, attitudes, and commitments is now up for grabs. One academic epitomized the established attitude among our liberal elites when she expressed the hope that the United States would "never again be culturally 'united,' if united means 'unified' in beliefs and practices." Nor is this merely an academic crotchet. Many politicians—and many courts—have colluded in spreading the multicultural gospel. The nation's motto—*E pluribus unum*—was chosen by Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams to express the ideal of faction- and heritage-transcending unity. America forged one people out of many peoples. Vice President Al Gore interpreted the tag to mean "Within one, many." This might have been inadvertence. It might have been simple ignorance. It might have been deliberate ideological provocation. Which is worst?

The combined effect of the multicultural enterprise has been to undermine the foundation of American national identity. Huntington speaks dramatically but not inaptly of "Deconstructing America."

> The deconstructionists promoted programs to enhance that status and influence of subnational racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. They encouraged immigrants to maintain their birth-country cultures, granted them legal privileges denied to native-born Americans, and denounced the idea of Americanization as un-American. They pushed the rewriting of history syllabi and textbooks so as to refer to the "peoples" of the United States in place of the single people of the Constitution. They urged supplementing or substituting for national history the history of subnational groups. They downgraded the centrality of English in American life and pushed bilingual education and linguistic diversity. They advocated legal recognition of group rights and racial preferences over the individual rights central to the American Creed. They justified their actions by theories of multiculturalism and the idea that diversity rather than unity or community should be America's overriding value. The combined effect of these efforts was to promote the deconstruction of the American identity that had been gradually created over three centuries.

Taken together, Huntington concludes, "these efforts by a nation's leaders to deconstruct the nation they governed were, quite possibly, without precedent in human history."

The various movements to deconstruct American identity and replace it with a multicultural "rainbow" or supra-national

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bureaucracy have made astonishing inroads in the last few decades and especially in the last several years. And, as Huntington reminds us, the attack on American identity has counterparts elsewhere in the West wherever the doctrine of multiculturalism has trumped the cause of national identity. The European Union—whose leaders are as dedicated to multicultural shibboleths as they are to rule by top-down, anti-democratic bureaucracy—is a case in point. But the United States, the most powerful national state, is also the most attractive target for deconstruction.

It is a curious development that Huntington traces. In many respects, it corroborates James Burnham's observation, in *Suicide of the West* (1964), that "liberalism permits Western civilization to be reconciled to dissolution." For what we have witnessed with the triumph of multiculturalism is a kind of hypertrophy or perversion of liberalism, as its core doctrines are pursued to the point of caricature. "Freedom," "diversity," "equality," "tolerance," even "democracy"—how many definitive liberal virtues have been redacted into their opposites by the imperatives of political correctness? If "diversity" mandates bilingual education, then we must institute bilingual education, even if it results in the cultural disenfranchisement of those it was meant to benefit. The passion for equality demands "affirmative action," even though the process of affirmative action depends upon treating people unequally.

If there is a bright spot in the portrait that Huntington paints, it revolves around the fact that centrifugal forces of multiculturalism are espoused chiefly by the intellectual and bureaucratic elite. For many ordinary people, the developments that Huntington outlines represent a catastrophe, not progress. What prospects do ordinary people have against the combined forces of the courts, the educational establishment, the "mainstream" media, and much popular culture? It is hard to say—at least, it is hard to say anything cheerful. But Huntington does provide several rays of hope. There are many movements to "take back America," to resuscitate the core values that, traditionally, have defined us as Americans. Indeed, Huntington's book may be regarded as a manifesto on behalf of that battle.

We stand at a crossroads. The future of America hangs in the balance. Huntington outlines several possible courses that the country might take, from the loss of our core culture to an attempt to revive the "discarded and discredited racial and ethnic concepts" that, in part, defined pre-mid-twentieth century America.

Huntington argues for a third alternative. If we are to preserve our identity as a nation we need to preserve the core values that defined that identity. What are those values? They embrace several things, including religion. You wouldn't know it from watching CNN or reading *The New York Times*, but there is a huge religious revival taking place now, affecting just about every part of the globe except Western Europe, which slouches towards godlessness almost as fast as it slouches towards bankruptcy and demographic catastrophe (neither Spain nor Italy are producing enough children to replace their existing populations, while the Muslim birthrate in France continues to soar).

Things look different in America. For if America is a vigorously secular country—which it certainly is—it is also a deeply religious one. It always has been. Tocqueville was simply minuting the reality he saw around him when he noted that "On my arrival in the United States the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention." As G. K. Chesterton put it a century after Tocqueville, America is "a nation with the soul of a church." Even today, America is a country where an astonishing 92 percent of the population says it believes in God and 80 to 85 percent of the population identifies itself as Christian. Hence Huntington's call for a return to America's core values is also a call to embrace the religious principles upon which the country was founded, "a recommitment

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to America as a deeply religious and primarily Christian country, encompassing several religious minorities adhering to Anglo-Protestant values, speaking English, maintaining its cultural heritage, and committed to the principles" of political liberty as articulated by the Founders.

Naturally, Huntington has been sharply criticized for prescribing a return to "Anglo-Protestant values" as an antidote for faltering American identity. But he is careful to stress that what he offers is an "argument for the importance of Anglo-Protestant culture, not for the importance of Anglo-Protestant people"—that is, a culture and set of values that "for three and a half centuries have been embraced by Americans of all races, ethnicities, and religions and that have been the source of their liberty, unity, power, prosperity, and moral leadership."

American identity was originally founded on four things: ethnicity, race, ideology, and culture. By the mid-twentieth century, ethnicity and race had sharply receded in importance. Indeed, one of America's greatest achievements is having eliminated the racial and ethnic components that historically were central to its identity. Ideology—the package of Enlightened liberal values championed by the Founders—are crucial but too thin for the task of forging or preserving national identity by themselves. ("A nation defined only by political ideology," Huntington notes, "is a fragile nation.") Which is why Huntington, like virtually all of the Founders, explicitly grounded American identity in religion.

It is often pointed out that there is no mention of God in the Constitution. This is true. Neither is the word "virtue" mentioned. But both are presupposed. As the historian Gertrude Himmelfarb points out, virtue, grounded in religion, was presumed "to be rooted in the very nature of man and as such . . . reflected in the *moeurs* of the people and in the traditions and informal institutions of society." It is also worth pointing out that if the Constitution is silent on religion, the Declaration of Independence is voluble, speaking of "nature's God," the "Creator," "the supreme judge of the world," and "divine Providence."

We are often told that the Founders were, almost to a man, Deists listing toward atheism. Michael Novak has done much to disabuse us of that idea. In her forthcoming book *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments*, Himmelfarb carries his work further. She shows how a distinctively American form of Enlightenment, deeply informed by the British Enlightenment and differing sharply from the anti-clerical rationalism of the French variety, nourished the Founders' understanding of politics and what constitutes the good life for man. It was a form of Enlightenment that, Himmelfarb observes, regarded religion as an indispensable ally of reason, not an enemy. In America, Tocqueville observed, unlike in France, the "spirit of religion" and "the spirit of freedom" support rather than oppose each other. "Religion sees in civil freedom a noble exercise of the faculties of man; in the political world, a field left by the Creator to the efforts of intelligence. . . . Freedom sees in religion the companion of its struggles and its triumphs, . . . the divine source of its rights. It considers religion as the safeguard of mores; and mores as the guarantee of laws."

Huntington's call for a return to America's core values is also a call to embrace the religious principles upon which the country was founded.

Today, we are encouraged to interpret "freedom of religion" to mean "freedom from religion"—unless, of course, your religion is suitably exotic. (One recalls Chesterton's observation that "Religious liberty might be supposed to mean that everybody is free to discuss religion. In practice it means that hardly anybody is allowed to mention it.") The ACLU is tortured by the thought of school children uttering

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the phrase "under God"; in June 2002, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in California ruled that the phrase violated the principle of the separation of church and state. Yet Florida (among other states) allows Muslim women to pose for a driver's license photograph with their faces veiled. The Founders would have been astounded—not to say alarmed—at this selective exclusion of religion from public life. They would have been even more astounded that it has been carried forward under the aegis of the First Amendment, perhaps the most wilfully misinterpreted text in America legal history.

Notwithstanding the ACLU and their allies, Himmelfarb is surely right that "The separation of church and state, however interpreted, did not signify the separation of church and society." Benjamin Rush, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, summed up the common attitude of the Founders toward religion when he insisted that "The only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in religion. Without it there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object of all republican governments." George Washington concurred: "Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principles."

Even Benjamin Franklin, one of the least religious of the Founders, wanted some mention of God in the Constitution and, according to Himmelfarb, proposed that the proceedings of the Consitutional Convention begin with a daily prayer. Militant secularists will quote Jefferson's brusque dismissal of religion in *Notes on the State of Virginia*: "It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." But they somehow never get around to quoting the passage that occurs a few pages later: "Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of people that these liberties are the gift of God?" As President, Himmelfarb notes, Jefferson was even more respectful of religion, and specifically Christianity, as the foundation of liberty and public virtue. On his way to church one Sunday, Jefferson was met by a friend.

> "You going to church Mr. J. You do not believe a word in it."
>
> "Sir [Jefferson replied], no nation has ever yet existed or been governed without religion. Nor can be. The Christian religion is the best religion that has been given to man and I as chief Magistrate of this nation am bound to give it the sanction of my example. Good morning Sir."

It is sometimes objected that, whatever lip-service the Founders gave to Christianity, their conception of religion was (the word "merely" implicitly supplied) pragmatic or utilitarian. Well, there was no doubt that the Founders thought religion was pragmatic, that is, socially useful, i.e., not merely a private affair with God. But why the implicit "merely"? As Himmelfarb argues, "this view of religion is not unworthy."

> To look upon religion as the ultimate source of morality, and hence of a good society and a sound policy, is not demeaning to religion. On the contrary, it pays religion—and God—the great tribute of being essential to the welfare of mankind. And it does credit to man as well, who is deemed capable of subordinating his lower nature to his higher, of venerating and giving obeisance to something above himself.

No nation lasts forever. An external enemy may eventually overrun and subdue it; internal forces of dissolution and decadence may someday undermine it, leaving it prey to more vigorous competitors. Sooner or later it succumbs. The United States is the most powerful nation the world has ever seen. Its astonishing military might, economic productivity, and political vigor are unprecedented. But someday, as Huntington reminds us, it too will fade or perish as Athens, Rome, and other great civilizations have faded or perished. Is the end, or

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the beginning of the end, at hand? No one's crystal ball is sufficiently clairvoyant to allow us to say. For decades—no, longer—we have been getting bulletins about the decline of the West, the rise and (especially) the fall of great powers, etc., etc.

So far, the West—or at least the United States—has disappointed its self-appointed undertakers. How do we stand now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century? It is worth remembering that besieged nations do not always succumb to the forces, external or internal, that threaten them. Sometimes, they muster the resolve to fight back successfully, to renew themselves. Today, America faces a new external enemy in the form of militant Islam and global terrorism. That minatory force, though murderous, will fail in proportion to our resolve to defeat it. Do we still possess that resolve? Inseparable from resolve is self-confidence, faith in the essential nobility of one's regime and one's way of life.

America also faces numerous internal threats, from the rise of immigration without assimilation to the dissolute forces of cultural decadence and radical multiculturalism. The forces of multiculturalism preach the dogma of bureaucratic cosmopolitanism. They encourage us to shed what is distinctively American in order to accommodate the quivering sensitivities of "humanity"—that imperious abstraction whose exigent mandates are updated regularly by such bodies as the United Nations, the World Court, and their allies in the professoriate and the liberal media. Huntington is right that "America cannot become the world and still be America." We face a choice between a multicultural future and an American future. Which will it be?

In *Washington's Crossing*, his marvelous book on Washington's leadership in the Revolutionary War, David Hackett Fischer argues that America won the war against a much larger, better trained, and better equipped army partly because of the "moral strength of a just cause" and partly because of "religion": "Americans," he notes, "were a deeply spiritual people, with an abiding faith that sustained them in adversity." Americans are still a deeply spiritual people, though many of our intellectual, cultural, and political leaders would have us forget that fact. In 1973, the commentator Irving Kristol observed that

> for well over a hundred and fifty years now, social critics have been warning us that bourgeois society was living off the accumulated moral capital of traditional religion and traditional moral philosophy, and that once this capital was depleted, bourgeois society would find its legitimacy ever more questionable. These critics were never, in their lifetime, either popular or persuasive. The educated classes of liberal-bourgeois society simply could not bring themselves to believe that religion was that important to a polity. *They* could live with religion or morality as a purely private affair, and they could not see why everyone else—after a proper secular education, of course—could not do likewise.

As the twenty-first century begins, we have a glorious opportunity—perhaps it is the last such opportunity—to start repaying some of the moral capital we have been so profligate with in recent decades. Some sages assure us that our fate is sealed, that inevitable forces have scripted the (unhappy) denouement of American civilization. I do not believe them. Those children I saw at Fort McHenry are—potentially—insurance against that gloomy prognostication. They, and thousands like them, are potent weapons against the dissolutions that threaten us. Will we have the wit to use those weapons effectively? Samuel Huntington urges us to foster "those qualities that have defined America since its founding," above all the Anglo-Protestant values that wed liberty to order. Many in the liberal, multicultural establishment have rejected Huntington's vision of American unity as nativist or worse. I believe that his critics are wrong. Benjamin Franklin got to the nub of the matter when, more than two hundred years ago, he observed that "We must all hang together or assuredly we shall all hang separately."

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Fundamentalism isn't the problem

by Kenneth Minogue

Like Yossarian in *Catch 22*, I'm exercised by the fact that people are trying to kill me. You may remember that Yossarian was flying bombers over Italy in 1944 and German gunners were trying to shoot his plane down. Yossarian and I are in a similar spot. You might well think we ought not to take it personally. My enemies are also out to get any civilian they can blow up throughout Europe, America, and other Western places. Anyone will do. Indeed, statistically speaking, their main success has been in blowing up luckless Muslims who get in their way. They are obviously a dumb and nasty lot, but how shall we describe them? President Bush calls them "terrorists" and has declared war on them. Other people call them "Islamicists" because what goes through their rather defective minds as they blow us up has something to do with verses from the Koran. "Terrorists" is probably the preferable designation, if only for the reason that most Muslims are not trying to kill me. Indeed, murderous Muslims are said to be "a tiny minority," and no doubt this is true, though I don't know what the evidence is. In any case other sets of people—Irish republicans and Basque separatists, for example—have also had a go at bumping me off.

The deep thinkers of journalism and social sciences, however, are not happy with this designation of "terrorist." Some are happy to use it only if they broaden it so as to put us all in the dock—as in talk about "state terrorism," an odd expression, since the whole point of terrorism is that it is a private rather than a public enterprise. But with their perennial quest for things called "root causes," radical thinkers want to go deeper, and they have made a marvellous discovery. It turns out that all the things they have long hated—globalism, prejudice, world poverty, and so on—are also the cause of this new inhabitant of the headlines. What is more interesting is that they have settled on a rather odd characterization of it: "fundamentalism."

It is a very strange expression. Marxism is the ideas of Marx, and nationalism is the nation conceived as some sort of ideal identity. What is fundamentalism the idea of? What is this "fundament" promoted to an "ism"? It is slippery stuff whatever it is. It might, for example, refer to the irrational attachment some people have to a few basic ideas from which all conduct is said to follow. This does indeed seem to be one of its meanings. Or, it might refer to having any deeply held beliefs at all: ideas resistant to criticism or perhaps even evidence. That too is part of it, but so far we're only talking about dogmatism or bigotry: old stuff. But what fundamentalism actually means in the conventional wisdom of the moment is beliefs generated by some old text. In other words, "fundamentalism" is an all-purpose expression denigrating the peoples of the Book (as the Muslims call them). Anyone who takes the Bible (either Testament) or the Koran seriously falls under the ter-

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minological lash of terrorism-inducing fundamentalism.

How is it that millions of harmless American Christians, or orthodox Jews, living pretty blameless lives, come to be incorporated under such a denigratory slogan? Fundamentalism, to use the cliché of the moment, is the new fascism. The problem is to discover why the net has been spread so widely. Part of the answer may be that one or two abortionists have been killed by enraged Christians, but that is hardly a matter of textual literalism. In any case, these people hardly constitute a serious threat to law and order. And how about Jews? Ah—here we may find ourselves blundering into the current liberal attitude to the Israeli situation. Israel's policy of reprisals against suicide bombers has been assimilated by some commentators to a form of terrorism, and the Israeli policy towards the West Bank is by some Israelis based on scriptural texts. Israeli policy might thus be construed as the results of close attention to ancient texts.

Even if one accepted this rather blinkered account of the problem, it would not tell us anything about terrorism. It's not as if all terrorists are religious. Social radicals and anarchists have ignited American fears in the past, and the Oklahoma bomb was not based on any sacred text. Timothy McVeigh was, if anything religious at all, a kind of neo-Stoic. It has been reported that the 9/11 bombers passed the night before the Twin Towers in a bar, a curious location for devout Muslims. As an explanation of terrorism, then, fundamentalism hits the target like a blunderbuss. A term like "fanaticism" might be apposite, because it refers not to a set of beliefs held, but to a manner of holding any belief. But it lacks the newly minted chic of "fundamentalism," which had historically began life as a designation for Christian opponents of modernism.

The outcome of public debate about these issues is that conventional wisdom currently believes that fundamentalism is a bad thing, and we must ask: what is the conventional wisdom up to? And the answer would seem to be two-fold. Firstly, it is engaging in our old friend moral equivalence. To target Muslims as the source of terrorism looks like Western civilization getting up on its high horse and denouncing the Other. We must not think we are better than others, even though the very rhetorical grammar of the term "fundamentalism" declares its users to be superior to those they are characterizing.

Secondly, it is an irresistible rhetorical triumph to be able to package together all the people of whom you disapprove in one nauseous bundle. Associating terrorists with fundamentalist Christians is, especially for some American Democrats, a deeply satisfying new take on the state of the world.

Satisfying, but of course absurd, for it amounts to saying that deeply held beliefs are always bad. It happens that our own liberal civilization is awash with convictions so deeply held that we send armies into other countries in order to spread them. We believe in human rights with such passion that we are imposing them on other civilizations as fast as we can go. We are certainly fundamentalist in spreading our views of the proper places of women in the world. Political correctness in our Western societies has been entrenched in law, and both legal and social penalties will happen if we don't hire enough women or if we utter such words as "nigger"—or even "niggardly"—in the hearing of others. In universities on both sides of the Atlantic, secular orthodoxy demands that Christian organizations must give equal opportunity to those they construe are sinners. A prayer that gays should recognize and repent of their sin has been judged a form of sexual harassment. In whipping civil society into line with secular orthodoxy, it's hard to get more fundamentalist than this.

The point is that we're into motes and beams territory here. And it's a case where moral equivalence turns out to be rather embarrassing for liberals. We know very well that Western societies find Muslims a problem because Islam demands that everyone must live in terms of the Koran as elaborated

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into the Sharia. Most Christians don't make any demand quite so comprehensive, but they certainly have a problem with abortion. But liberals, for all their airy talk of tolerance, are determined that everyone should toe their own line. As every Muslim knows, liberal internationalism is a creed every bit as inclusive—fundamentalist, shall we say?—as their own. What follows from this is that to attack terrorists (and others!) as "fundamentalist" is inaccurate. Islamicists might, to cover this point, be called "textualists," but their "fundamentalism" certainly doesn't distinguish them from many of the people they are trying to kill.

There is, however, a much more profound reason why the whole nonsense about fundamentalism is flawed. It arises from the logic of morality. It may be summarized as the distinction between "believing that" and "behaving how." Consider the case of such prejudices as anti-Semitism. Does decent behavior towards Jews result from a belief that Jews are no different from the rest of humanity and that anti-Semitism is a vulgar prejudice? Or does it result from the good manners of accepting the normative rule that one ought not to treat people on the basis of category membership but in terms of their individual qualities? Anti-Semitism is, or at least was until recently, an easy case. It was a bit of both.

The point is a practical one. Good manners, indeed any kind of decent conduct, can only prosper if conduct is separated from all the often dotty things that go on in peoples' heads from time to time. But political correctness seeks to put windows in men's souls, as Queen Elizabeth I once described it. She rightly didn't approve of it. The politically correct deplore the fact that we may have to live in an imperfect world that cannot get any better than peaceful coexistence with people having unsound ideas about women, or blacks, or the disabled, or whatever other category might surface. The only path to a peaceful world (runs the doctrine) is the universal acceptance of the right beliefs about humanity and equality.

The moral propaganda that has in most Western states become the substitute for our devitalized tradition of moral conduct is based on the principle of "believing that." Race and sex are examples of areas that have become undiscussable because a blanket of right-thinking dogma has been draped over them in schools, universities and public spaces. The problem with this solution to the problem of so-called prejudice is that human beings are intrepid generalizers. It needs but a couple of unfortunate encounters with some definable others to generate a hostile stereotype. Often, one will do. I conclude that the project of creating perfection by imposing the right thoughts on people cannot possibly work. Indeed, Communist regimes tried that road to utopia far more energetically than would be possible in our still more or less free societies. The moment the screws were loosened, the whole edifice tumbled.

The attack on fundamentalism fights a war on two fronts. One of them is cognitive, the other normative. The cognitive attack is directed against the sacred texts to which religious believers appeal. The Bible and the Koran are bad because they block the moral modernizations generated by our ever-changing society. Homosexuality has become one test case of the supposed intolerance of the religious. It is now sensibly believed by most people that homosexual activities ought not to be penalized.

Among many Christian believers, however, it is still construed as a sin forbidden by God. Intelligent believers know perfectly well that the law is better kept out of the regulation of sin. We may guess that homosexual bishops have thrived since very early Christian times, but they seldom (as Mrs. Patrick Campbell used to say) "frighten the horses." Homosexuality was a sin, but in Christian doctrine, we are all sinners, and answerable to God.

Gays now benefit from the broad tolerations of modern moral attitudes. But in a world in which the personal is widely believed to be the political, the sheep of toleration soon turns into the wolf that

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demands acceptance, indeed, admiration. Homosexuality becoming tolerated, activists moved on to demand that it be not only legal but theologically approved and indeed admired as merely one lifestyle on all fours with our family traditions. A demand for tolerance is one thing, but a demand for approval is something else again. It amounts to the attempt to engineer our admirations, and, in a free society, it is not—shall we say?—to be tolerated. Gay Lib has in various countries followed a policy of ambushing civil institutions, most recently the churches, and then denouncing any objection to explicit and public approval of homosexuality as a piece of intolerance and bigotry.

From a Christian point of view, however, the refusal to countenance public homosexuality is merely the rejection of corrupt moral fashions, and it is essential to sustain the integrity of the religion. No plural society will ever be without conflicts of this kind, and when "society" or the state attempts to impose a solution, we are in the presence of—fanaticism? Bigotry? Perhaps fundamentalism. It would spell the death of civil society. Freedom must mean that institutions have the autonomy to determine their own practices and admirations within the law. Otherwise, we confront the totalitarian demand that everyone should think the same thing and participate in the same admirations.

The second attack on fundamentalism is normative. It affirms toleration as the highest value. Tolerating the tolerant presents no problems. What do we do, however, when confronted with the intolerant? Should we tolerate the people whom liberals denounce as racists, sexists, homophobes, indeed even "judgmentalists"? In actual fact, liberals are highly intolerant of such people. They ostracize them socially, treat them intellectually with contempt, and invoke the law on them whenever possible. In these ways they force upon us the paradox that the norm of tolerance can lead directly to intolerance. The ideal of toleration sounds like a formal condition allowing all flowers to bloom, but it turns out on examination to adumbrate a determinate form of life no less intrusive than the Sharia or "fundamentalist" Christianity. The liberal solution to this problem in the long term is a reversion to cognitive fantasy. It is that we must try to achieve right-thinking by "educating" the young: everyone must be taught the egalitarian doctrine that men and women, black and white, heterosexual and homosexual, Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist, and so on are all part of the one human family and must be treated as brothers and sisters.

From the point of view of this aspiration, fundamentalists are those who reject this world community. They are people who demand from society a certain cultural compatibility with their fellow citizens. And in that sense, of course, most of us are fundamentalists. This does not mean an end to pluralism, but, for those living in Western societies, it does mean a considerable resentment against the kind of narrow multiculturalism that would suppress every traditional custom on the ground that it might offend the sensitivity of immigrants. For liberal internationalists, however, any kind of cultural particularity that cannot be bracketed off as merely private blocks the path to a better world.

A better world? Which of us could refuse to sign up to such a project? But it is that very project which sets the problem. As we push forward with our lives from day to day, most of us act, according to our lights and in a small way, to make the world a bit better. But that is not what "a better world" means in this context. It means a collective project to transform the human condition. It means, in fact, playing fantasy ruler of the world, perhaps even god-like creator. It means transforming the human race. This ambition of making a better world is one we inherit from the eighteenth century, when reason first seriously embarked on its program of sweeping away prejudice, bigotry, superstition—indeed, religion itself. Christians might well regard the Enlightened as a set of people too impatient to wait for the delights

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of heaven. They want love and brotherhood, and they want it now! The twentieth century was convulsed by people enthused by this project, and some of them are still around. They may be wrinkled, but they are not repentant, because (so they convey to us) at least they wanted a better world. They may have supported some pretty vile causes, but at least, they cared! One ancestor of these idealists was Voltaire, who satirized Leibnizian theodicy in the character of Dr. Pangloss, Candide's philosophical mentor, who believed that "this was the best of all possible worlds" and that every evil was a (logically) necessary evil. In our time, after the massacres of peoples, we are not likely to accept the whole program of justifying the ways of God to man, but I have always had a soft spot for Dr. Pangloss. Right or wrong, he had found the secret of happiness: this is the only world we have, and we had better accept it. It is the belief elaborated in the famous serenity prayer, which invokes a distinction between what we can change and what we must endure. The project of a better world is an ambition that loses all grip on wisdom of this kind. And it is an ambition abandoned in the ultimate wisdom at which Voltaire's Candide finally arrives: *Il faut cultiver notre jardin*.

But liberal internationalists had better face the fact that it is fundamentalists in this broad sense who are in closer touch with reality than they are. For the basic fact of human life is that Arab and Israeli, Fijian and Indian, Hutu and Tutsi, Christian and Muslim, Sri Lankan and . . . but why go on? The list of those who don't like each other and would prefer to live in separate states is about as long as the whole human race. This is, of course, a collective not an individual matter. Individuals can bridge almost any divide, but categories cannot. The great achievement of the nation state, and the reason why it remains so much the ideal form of life for most people was that, after taking some centuries to shake down, it created a political form in which people could for the most part live together without sullenness or falling into massacre. It is an achievement we would be foolish to take for granted. It included many pluralities of sex, preference, and mode of life; it could even incorporate quite a lot of ethnic mixture, but not all. The liberal hostility to fundamentalism is the passion of the internationalist who keeps telling us that the national state is an anachronism. Liberals claim that its day is over. But fundamentalists know better.

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The man who made Scouting

by Anthony Daniels

There used to be a beer in Tanzania—Safari brand—that gave you a hangover without making you drunk. In similar fashion, children are often now disillusioned without ever having had any illusions. They are disenchanted without ever having been enchanted. For them, sophistication consists of being surprised by nothing, amused by nothing, interested in nothing, but bored by everything.

Needless to say, this is not a recipe for a happy life. I suspect that boredom of this existentially terminal kind is at the heart of the tremendous and insatiable search for self-destruction that has reached such epidemic proportions in the western world. Only the abyss gives a simulacrum of meaning to an otherwise empty life, and only misery is authentic.

The problem of the meaning of life is not a new one, even if it grows ever more acute now that the struggle for existence has been so decisively won, and genuine, heartfelt religious belief continues to decline. Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the Boy Scout movement, understood instinctively that boys need both a belief in something and physical activity if they are not to go to the bad, their natural destination.

Scouting for Boys,[1] the first edition of which is here republished, is the founding manifesto of a world-wide movement to which 350,000,000 males have belonged since its inception in 1908, the year before my father's birth. (The Boy Scouts of America was incorporated two years later by the Chicago millionaire William Dickson Boyce, who had visited British Scout headquarters in London in 1909.) As a physical specimen, the republished version fully partakes of the dismal production standards of British publishers, being printed on very nasty paper and cheaply bound, though the book is cheap only in the metaphorical sense. The Oxford University Press ought to be ashamed of itself.

Baden-Powell's book is profoundly disconcerting to read, especially when you consider that it went through many editions in his lifetime and sold millions of copies. Not only does it reveal no consecutive thought, lacking even a rudimentary principle of arrangement, but it is so anti-intellectual in temper that it could be a bible for philistines. It is a rag-bag of conventional moral precept and exhortation, practical advice about erecting tents and tracking wild animals, ex-cathedra statements and adumbrations of rules, historical (or rather, pseudo-historical) anecdotes, descriptions of games and even short one-act plays.

The introduction to the book is by a professor of colonial and post-colonial literature (by their academic titles shall ye know them), who says, "we could go so far as to say that features of its style might be called positively and hence presciently 'postmod-

1 *Scouting for Boys*, by Robert Baden-Powell; Oxford University Press, 382 pages, $26.

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ern.'" I expect the professor means this as a compliment, or at least as a saving grace of a book with which she is not otherwise very sympathetic. She continues: "There is the text's delight in mini-narratives and citations, a lot of them cursory and inaccurate; there is its non-progressive structure textured with pictures and subheadings, in irregular font sizes." This establishes what I have long suspected: that "postmodern" is code for lacking in mental power, undisciplined, lazy, and unwilling to concentrate. Postmodernism allows anyone, however feather-brained, to claim to be an intellectual, though it is precisely the function of the intellect to bring order to experience wherever possible.

Of course, Baden-Powell would not have claimed to be an intellectual; indeed, he would have been horrified had anyone suggested it. In large part, his movement was a reaction against what he and many others saw as the over-intellectualization of life. In his view, boys who spent too much time poring over books and not enough time sitting round camp fires in the wilderness became pigeon-chested and short-sighted. His approval of nature did not extend to masturbation, however, which he called self-abuse, and which, according to him as to so many others, led to precisely the same conditions, plus epilepsy. Cold baths of the offending parts and ceaseless physical activity were the antidote to this fell habit; but if his concerns now seem absurd to us, he was only a late follower of a minatory tradition already a century and a half old. It was destroyed only by the coldly analytical researches of German sexologists.

Baden-Powell was a British soldier of modest attainments and ability who happened to become a national hero because he was the officer in charge at Mafeking, a small South African town besieged for seven months by the Boers during the Boer War. It took the entire might of the then British Empire to defeat a relative handful of backwoodsmen, revealing the Empire's weakness and fragility, and when the siege of Mafeking was finally lifted there were wild celebrations in Britain so remarkable that, for several decades, the word "mafeking" became a verb for making merry in a boisterous way. (With the radical foreshortening of historical perspective brought about by current modes of teaching, you'd have to go a long way nowadays before you found a young Briton who was acquainted with Mafeking, either as an historical location or as a verb.)

Despite his status as a national hero, Baden-Powell was not promoted very far. His intellectual limitations were well-recognized. He therefore devoted himself urgently to the character-formation of British boys rather than to advancement in the army. In the process, he soon became the recognized head of a world-wide movement, thereby proving that not every great achievement is the consequence of superior intellect, as intellectuals often like to suppose.

The anxieties that motivated him were specific to his time and place. Recruitment into the ranks of the army during the Boer War had revealed the pitiful condition of young British manhood. Stunted stature meant that the army was obliged to reduce its physical requirements for entry; dentition was often so poor that soldiers could not eat the hard biscuit that was the staple ration for soldiers in the South African veldt.

It was clear to Baden-Powell that the Empire could not be defended or maintained by a race of such poor specimens. There were several nations that would not long suffer Britain's pre-eminence in the world to go unchallenged, chief among them the rising powers of the United States, Germany, and Japan (he didn't foresee internal opposition to imperialism, for example by Indian and African nationalists). Race degeneration, the evidence for which seemed to him undeniable, had therefore to be reversed if a quarter of the globe's land surface was still to be painted red.

The cause of this degeneration was obvious to Baden-Powell. Britain had a longer and more intense experience of industrial

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urbanization than any other country in the world, and the results were ugly and depressing. It is true that this process was voluntary, being the movement of the rural population into the towns in search of better opportunities, and that, by the time Baden-Powell wrote, conditions had ameliorated considerably since Engels's book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*; but the British industrial landscape was (and still is) very grim. It was not a place in which chivalry was likely to flourish. Industrial might, already in relative decline, had bred a race of weaklings.

Baden-Powell brought to his task a mind full of contradictory prejudices, opinions, and shards of historical knowledge and mythology. It is not easy to tell even to whom his book, which went through ten editions and sold millions of copies during his lifetime, is addressed. Sometimes it appears to speak to boys directly, sometimes to those who are in charge of them, and sometimes to the general reader.

A lot of what he wrote was so preposterous that it is difficult to understand how anyone could have taken him seriously, let alone taken up his suggestions. For a man who emphasizes the salutary effect of nature study on boys' minds, for example, he is often remarkably ignorant of elementary biology. He thought, or at least wrote, that toads were reptiles and bacteria were tiny insects, visible only through a microscope.

His knowledge of history was distinctly patchy as well. Baden-Powell seemed to think that there had been scouts (that is to say, bearers of the Boy Scout ethos) throughout history, that there was an inherent scoutness, as it were, in men and boys, waiting only to be fostered and brought out, as it had previously existed only at random. His favorite scout in this sense was John Smith, he who was rescued by Pocahontas, and from whom Baden-Powell falsely claimed descent, whose exploits he mentions in highly romanticized fashion throughout the book. Another scout of history was Richard-coeur-de-lion. One is irresistibly reminded of Sellar and Yeatman's *1066 and All That*, according to which Richard-Gare-de-Lyon was so called because he kept going back and forth to France. I think that an historiography that consists solely of the backward projection of our present political obsessions and social discontents is both seriously inaccurate and psychologically and politically harmful; but to portray mediaeval England, as Baden-Powell does, as inhabited by knights errant, completely loyal to their king while rescuing damsels in distress (from what? premenstrual tension?) is trivial, dull, and stupid, and likely in the end to produce an exaggerated reaction. It is one thing to instil pride in an historical tradition, but another to deprive history of all reality.

One cannot accuse Baden-Powell of dishonesty, however, in the sense of having deliberately and consciously misled his readers. The fact is that his own grasp of reality was often not very tenacious; it was no coincidence that *Peter Pan* should have become his favorite play. Perhaps this was not surprising. Even his own name was the product of fantasy, in this case that of his mother. A woman for whom all intellectual and artistic accomplishment served a single end, namely social advancement, she thought that a double-barrelled name would conduce to that all-important desideratum, and accordingly put a hyphen between her deceased husband's Christian and family name. (Such names are often the object of derision. Baden-Powell was known at school as Bathing-Towel. The last Conservative attorney-general of the old flogging school, Sir Reginald Manningham-Buller, was universally known as Sir Reginald Bullying-Manner.)

Baden-Powell's mother then set about creating a distinguished genealogy, as if past distinction were the key to present advancement, claiming descent from, among others, a Welsh prince, though it is likely that she would have disdained to visit the Principality in its distinctly unromantic current incarnation. Baden-Powell himself, who long remained under his mother's powerful in-

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fluence, inherited her fantasies and at least some of her attitudes. Though himself the author of several books and a war correspondent at various times to boost his army pay, he fully partook of his mother's affectedly aristocratic disdain for intellectual effort that was one of the most depressing aspects of the Victorian class system.

When he was a young subaltern in India, for example, he accepted without question his brother officers' contempt for artillerymen who were technically accomplished but socially inferior. Though he took army examinations to secure his own promotion, he always derided such competitive, meritocratic competition. He accepted, again without question, his regimental scale of values, according to which it was imperative to settle gambling debts at once, but quite *comme il faut*, as well as amusing, to keep poor Indian traders waiting for their money. It is strange, and not very creditable, that Baden-Powell, who pondered much on national decline, never understood the increasing connection between national power and technological prowess, though he himself invented an adaptation of the machine gun, preferring to see power solely as the product of the kind of moral superiority and chivalrous manliness that he was so actively to promote.

The social environment in which he grew from boy to man, combined with his pathologically strong attachment to his mother, meant that Baden-Powell never matured very far. All his life, he preferred the company of young, immature women to that of mature women, not for reasons of physical attraction, but because he found mental immaturity congenial and unthreatening. He loved amateur theatricals and practical jokes, but although he was an amiable man, he was generally incapable of close friendship or deep relationships. Baden-Powell was not only child-like: he was childish.

But it was these qualities that gave such force to his scouting ideas. Because he never fully grew up himself, he understood boys from the inside. Because he was such a fantasist, he understood the importance of fantasy in the life of boys. He was therefore able to capture their imagination the world over, despite the fact that he was an ardent imperialist who addressed himself in the first instance to the boys of the Empire, who would grow up to rule the world because of their superior inheritance.

He was not straightforwardly a racist, however, as some have accused him of having been. It is quite clear from *Scouting for Boys* that he had great respect for the Zulus, because this warrior race seemed to partake of so many of the virtues he extolled and wished to inculcate in his urbanized degenerates: discipline, bravery, stoicism in the face of danger, self-sacrifice, hardiness, and keen powers of observation. Similarly, he has not a bad word to say for those whom he calls "the Japs." They are healthier and hardier than the whites because they bathe in cold water so often and eat very sparingly. Indeed, they are almost an ideal people because they have hung on to their warrior code of Bushido (it is ironic, and perhaps not entirely coincidental, that Baden-Powell should have singled out Germany and Japan as the two countries in which chivalry was not dead, two nations that within a few decades were to commit atrocities on an industrial scale). Red Indians also had supposedly lived the kind of unreflective life of which he approved, outdoors, healthy, and unintellectual. Only the fact that Captain Smith was a true Briton permitted him to get the better of them—for their own good, of course. There was a limit, after all, to the nobility of natives.

Some of Baden-Powell's fantasizing was distinctly paranoid, as fantasy so often is. He wanted boys to learn tracking skills so that they might be useful when Britain, surrounded by envious enemies, was invaded. He seemed to imagine the invasion as a siege of Mafeking on a much bigger scale. Boy scouts, being both cunning and unobtrusive, would act as gatherers of intelligence about enemy movements, and as message bearers across enemy lines. They would be essential to the war effort.

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To this end, boys should learn to observe everything as they walked along. They should learn to recognize anything suspicious, for only in this way would they be able to help the police in their inquiries. Baden-Powell recommended the kind of exercises that Flaubert gave the young Maupassant to perform, though for very different ends. Maupassant was to observe so that he could extract and describe salient details with absolute precision; Boy Scouts were to observe so that they might serve in the fashion of Sherlock Holmes's Baker Street Irregulars. Baden-Powell repeatedly recommends the close study of Conan Doyle's stories as a means of training.

This mildly, almost innocently, paranoid stance is one that appeals to boys, especially those brought up in a highly predictable environment in which nothing much happens, or appears to happen. It invests even the most banal world with interest and potential danger. This suits the psychology of boys very well. I remember as a child that I and my friends believed, or pretended to believe, that an old lady who lived alone in a large house with an overgrown garden, too large for her to maintain, was actually a wicked witch who was just waiting for children to fall into her clutches. Our hearts pounding, we would creep into her garden, as if it were full of danger, and then run away, experiencing the joy of a narrow escape. Of course, we knew that it was make-believe, and yet we took it seriously as well, a curious instance of man's inherent ability to split his mind into irreconcilable parts, and yet retain his personal identity. By this means, we enchanted a world that might otherwise have seemed dull and workaday; and the consequences of osteoarthritis and Alzheimer's disease were rendered magical and frightening.

It was to this mechanism that Baden-Powell unselfconsciously appealed, and which explains the resounding success of a movement that at first sight was designed to appeal only to the boys of the ruling race. For children everywhere needed the stimulation of their imagination, and Baden-Powell taught them to see romance in snapped twigs, bicycle tire-marks, footprints, and the like. His explanation of why camp-sites should always be left tidy—that a tidy camp gave fewer clues to a pursuing enemy—was more likely to appeal to boys than almost any other possible reason for tidiness that might be offered. Boys love to have enemies, to assure them of their own importance, and the idea that a blanket neatly folded might confound them was a delightful one. Never can boys have been more comprehensively fooled into doing the right thing.

Baden-Powell insisted that there was a lot of tracking for boys to do even in towns, and that the small and undramatic fauna of the British Isles—frogs, voles, weasels, and the like—were just as interesting as the big game of Africa. In short, Baden-Powell taught boys how to find the world around them fascinating and romantic, rather than dull and tedious. He made boys look at the familiar with new eyes, and thereby not only reduced their propensity to wrongdoing for the sake of the sensation it evokes, but also prepared them for an interesting and varied life. A man who can find pleasure in the minutiae around him will not easily succumb to tedium vitae, our worst enemy after infectious disease.

Such, at any rate, is the theory. My own experience in the movement, confined to the Wolf Cubs, confirmed it only in part. From a very early age, a certain natural contrariety and egotism prevented me from wholeheartedly surrendering my individuality to any collectivity. I could never, for example, see in team sports anything other than a mild and occasional diversion, whose importance was very minor. By the age of twelve, at the latest, typically British attempts to make sport a metaphor for life itself were to me utterly ridiculous, and I viewed people who thought sport important with contempt. My experience of one scoutmaster was more than sufficient to confirm my view of group recreational activities as inherently absurd.

The scoutmaster was portly and middle-

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aged. I suspect that he had volunteered for scoutmaster's duties only because the headmaster of the school, an overbearing former Indian army colonel who called his beer tea, bullied him into it. I think you would have had to be very solemn indeed not to find his scout uniform irresistibly comic. His long brown corduroy shorts going down nearly met his woolly socks going up. His wide leather belt, with its brass Scout-badge buckle, squeezed his torso like a tube of toothpaste, and met about as much resistance from his ample adipose tissue. He wore a ridiculous scarf around his neck, complete with a leathern ring, and on big occasions a broad-brimmed hat. His shirt was festooned with badges, each with a symbolic meaning of which he had but a faint grasp. I think many condemned men must have looked happier on their way to the gallows than did he in his scoutmaster's uniform.

He was possibly the most urbanized man I have ever met, who under normal circumstances would never have ventured outdoors except to reach another building. He was more at home in an overheated sitting room, playing Bach on upright pianos, than in the great outdoors, and his favorite food was cake, of which he ate prodigious quantities if given the opportunity. He would not much have cared for biltong, the South African jerked meat, sometimes made of ostrich, that was the staple of trekkers and scouts on the backveldt. No one could have been less convincing in the bogus invented rituals of the Scouting movement.

He knew less about sport than any man I have met since. The headmaster, with his unfailing sadism, appointed him sports-master as well as scoutmaster. To him fell the task of overseeing our football games, but he knew less of the rules than a Martian might have garnered from observing a single game. The resultant anarchy endeared him to us. It allowed the less sporting among us to feed the ducks on the nearby canal.

He would take us on Scouting rambles on Hampstead Heath, where such big game as adolescent lovers was sometimes to be tracked down to the bushes. Nature study wasn't exactly his thing either: he was more of a grammarian and—very short-sighted—could hardly tell a swan from a hedgehog. But he was good at telling stories, and we sat under a tree listening to them until it was time to go home. My only lasting legacy of these so-called rambles was a love of amphibia that is with me still: frogs, toads, and newts, for which we used to hunt while he drank his thermos flask of "tea."

I wish now that I had joined a more conventional Scouting group, that took Baden-Powell's instruction to do at least one good deed a day more seriously. It might have made me less of an individualist. Many of Baden-Powell's ideals were, or became, noble. Having started as a fearful snob, he eventually wanted to train boys from all social classes to be gentlemen, and believed it could be done. Although a Christian, he urged mutual respect between religions, and his tolerance was deeply felt rather than merely ideological. He urged a decent code of individual kindness and civic duty. He wanted boys to engage in healthy activity. He was a philistine, but he was prescient about the dangers of a world without enchantment for its young male inhabitants, the world of the contemporary inner city.

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New poems
by Debora Greger, Richard Tillinghast & Deborah Warren

Writer-in-residence in limbo

after Li Po

How little they cared the cost!
Fine food on dishes of green jade,
like Ming grave goods—

if I had died and gone to heaven,
heaven was a minor outpost,
far from the emperor's favor.

It was the raisin capital of the world,
where I ate and drank and did not think once
of you back east. I must have died.

One of the women drove me east
to see the giant sequoias. I was so small,
just clay in the shape of a servant at their feet.

Far above me, boughs swished and sighed
like the silken sleeves of court,
the needles unthreading.

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Sometimes we took boys with us
to carry the trappings of the office
and gave ourselves up to the moment,

forgetting a semester was an eternity.
We were stuck with them. Still, their faces
were never smoother than in the chilly mirror

of that lake. Even I grew younger.
Someone had brought a radio.
A thin wind blew cheap music into the dark

like cigarette smoke. O lost civilization!
Someone laughed at a splash,
or I heard a loon. . . . But I must call a boy

and make him kneel before me
to tie this up. Love, there's a leaf
in the shape of a hand in this limbo

that I would send you, dark red,
and one like a waxy green heart.
There is much I haven't told you.

—*Debora Greger*

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Camille Monet on her deathbed

—after the painting by Claude Monet

Camille has ventured out in a blizzard it seems.
Her husband has brushstroked her in a hurry as she
lies there dead.
What looks like a bridal veil rides up over her head,
the mouth open, showing the teeth.
The flared nostrils suggest hard breathing
just past.

Of her, what do we know other
than the smudges of pigment—
a touch of bruised scarlet in the eye of the storm
where maybe she clutched a red kerchief in her agony.
Or could someone have given her flowers to hold?

And is that her right
hand, a claw roughed in on the coverlet—
cobalt blue over the ice-slick of bedclothes?

Apparition from nightmare,
a white cloth tied up under her chin
to lock her jaw shut,
her body in its dark nightdress cuts
—as in a dream I can't wake up from—
underneath the fog of her surroundings
like a tugboat transgressing through the harbor.

—Richard Tillinghast

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A hill

The net of stars that holds the night in place,
with Cassiopeia and Berenice's Hair
as fixed as a cage across the dome of space,
with Cygnus, the Lion and the Little Bear
and Taurus tame, with Orion lying there—
as long as the ground you're standing on is flat,
they're all too motionless to wonder at;

but stand on a hill, at an angle to the sky,
and it's not so much that you look them in the eye;
it's this: Orion, the Bear, the Gemini
go wheeling around an evening gone askew—
the whole horizon pitched and out of true,
the night undone and still in the making, new
and enough off balance to be dazzled by.

—Deborah Warren

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Theater

Raisin' Cain

by Mark Steyn

Those of us who've sat through Sophocles set in a Dublin housing project or Shakespeare relocated to Fascist Italy or Blairite Britain are familiar with the standard defense: the specifics of time and place, clothes and furniture aren't important; what's enduring is the author's immortal insights into human nature. The revival of *A Raisin in the Sun* (at the Royale) upends the argument. Here is a play from the day before yesterday—1959—in which the exterior appearances—the costumes and props—are instantly recognizable, and yet the underlying human impulses might as well come from another planet.

Lorraine Hansberry took her title from "Harlem," Langston Hughes's famous poem of 1931:

> What happens to a dream deferred?
> Does it dry up
> like a raisin in the sun
> Or fester like a sore—
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over—
> Like a syrupy sweet?
>
> Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.
>
> *Or does it explode?*

Miss Hansberry applied the question to a black household in 1950s Chicago, trying to work their way up and out of a cramped tenement and into a home in the suburbs, small business, college education, the professions and beyond. It's a nuclear family that's either gonna blow or just shrivel up. *A Raisin in the Sun* was the first Broadway play by a black woman, and Brooks Atkinson hailed it as "a Negro *Cherry Orchard*." It's truer to say *Raisin* did for the straight play what *Flower Drum Song* was doing for musical comedy around the same time—that's to say, *Raisin* applied the formula of post-war gritty working-class slice-of-life drama to what for Broadway audiences was still an exotic milieu, the urban black household. Forty-five years ago, Sidney Poitier thrilled New York audiences as Walter Lee Younger, the great black hope of the family, living with his wife, son, sister, and mother on the South Side of Chicago, working as chauffeur to a rich white man, but with big plans of a better life beyond the ghetto. It didn't seem like a star role back then, but you realize long before final curtain at this new production that Walter's the heart of the play. Get that wrong and you're the one stuck with the shriveled raisin.

Kenny Leon's production opens on a wonderful set by Thomas Lynch: shrinking a big Broadway proscenium stage to convey the pokiness of a small apartment is trickier than you think. But to play the little guy they thought big: the Sidney Poitier part has gone to Sean Combs, formerly Puff Daddy and/or P. Diddy. For *New Criterion* readers who aren't as big gangsta rap fans as

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John Kerry claims to be, I should explain that Mr. Daddy is a celebrated hip-hop mogul, hip-haute couturier, vocal artiste, and employer of nightclub sharpshooters. P. Diddy stepping into the shoes of P. Sidney is all by itself a potted history of what happened to Langston Hughes's dream. Let's be honest, most of us on the Broadway beat were looking for Mr. Diddy to turn in one of the all-time great stinkeroo performances. Alas, he knows his lines and doesn't bump into the furniture. So, as bad performances go, this one isn't that good. Yet his performance and his presence unbalance and undermine the entire play in quite devastating ways.

The evening begins in the shadow of his celebrity, literally. We see only the reflection of Combs as that fine actress Audra McDonald, playing his wife, calls, "Walter Lee! It's time for you to get up!" At the Royale, this elicits the first of many sharp intakes of breath. The play's pulling not a Broadway crowd but a 60–70 percent young black audience, and, I'd venture, something like a 90 percent Puffophile set. This first intake of breath seems to be prompted by the possibility that some no-name actress is dissing Diddy.

Not to worry. For his Broadway debut, Puff Daddy is playing a daddy but is as puffed up as ever. Lorraine Hansberry was twenty-nine when she wrote *Raisin*, and dead six years later, on the eve of civil rights, the Great Society, Affirmative Action, and cultural liberation. The dream wasn't deferred, but nor did it turn out exactly as expected. Like Langston Hughes's poem, Miss Hansberry's play is a series of questions, about the pillars of black life—family and faith are both supportive and oppressive. She could hardly have foreseen that within little more than a generation the questions would become moot. What was in Miss Hansberry's day typical and average barely exists four decades on: a working-class black nuclear family with a male head of household. Sean Combs, for example, had a much more materially prosperous upbringing than the Younger family did. He went to a private school. On the other hand, his dad was killed when he was three, and ever since he's been around what, for a white private schoolboy, would be a statistically remarkable amount of violent death, including that of his best friend, the muthaf---- to whom he was closest, slain in the east coast/west coast rap wars, a development in black pop culture it would be hard to explain to the late Miss Hansberry: Imagine if Count Basie had Duke Ellington killed and, in return, Nat "King" Cole had Basie gunned down.

Rappers who make it to their tenth anniversary in showbusiness are known for living large, and none larger than Puffy. In a touching vignette, his acting coach for *Raisin*, Susan Batson, explained that her student found it impossible to embrace the concept of failure, defeat, setback. She'd pose questions like "What if someone came in and said they'd run off with your money?," and Puffy would reply, "You can't ask someone to imagine that because I won't allow it." Doesn't exactly help with the character motivation exercises.

And that's what shows on stage. In the play's first scene, Walter Lee's mother (Phylicia Rashad) is waiting for an insurance check, for $10,000. The Youngers are divided over what to do with the money. Walter would like the whole lot to invest in a liquor store and thus liberate himself from driving around rich white folks all day. But his mother has other plans: she plunks $3,500 down for a house in a fancier (i.e., white) neighborhood, and gives the rest to her son, on the understanding he'll put $3,000 away so his sister Beneatha can go to medical school. Instead, he gives the entire six-and-a-half grand to a pal, with disastrous consequences. It's not about money, it's about the choices you make.

This notion barely registers in Combs's performance. As Walter, he has some gestures—he slumps and places his hands on his head in ways that make it look like a routine his choreographer taught him. But the internal life of an ordinary black father of his own

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age a mere half-century ago is entirely beyond him. So he puffs himself up and plays Walter Lee as the Fifties only gangsta rapper—all windy attitude and adolescent preening. Even his slumping seems to be an act of self-worship. In deference to his drama coach, he makes a valiant effort to register emotion. When he's given bad news, he responds by raising his eyebrows, widening his eyes, and forming his mouth into an O. I was still trying to think what this reminded me of, when Puffy realizes he's lost the family savings and drops to the floor howling, "That money is made out of my father's *flesh*!"

Al Jolson on his knees doing "Mammy" at the Winter Garden, circa 1926.

It's slightly freaky watching a black man do his own minstrel act. But, in this case, the authentic black man of 2004 is so estranged from the authentic black man of 1954 he's meant to be playing he might as well be doing it in burnt cork. Not unreasonably, the audience finds it hard to buy the usually bejeweled, befurred, Bentley-chauffeured P. Diddy as a loser, and the night I went they responded to the Jolsonesque eye-rolling by laughing. Not everyone cracked up, but enough did to be audible. At the play's climax, the big hitherto tearjerking speech in which a humiliated Walter Lee reveals that he's sold the house to the racist white neighbors who don't want the family living among them seemed to be especially side-splitting. The customers aren't laughing at Puffy—heaven forbid! They're laughing at the idea of their guy having to play such a floppo. In other words, they're laughing at the play. Not because they're billionaire celebrities like he is, but because, even if you're not, the moral questions that so exercise the Younger family seem to be all but beyond comprehension. The central characterization of the play's milieu—respectable poverty—is lost to its audience.

The blame for the guffaws lies not with P. Diddy and his fans but with Kenny Leon and his producers. They signed Combs because they wanted a non-Broadway clientele. But they failed to anticipate what would happen if they got one. At one level, it's exhilarating. Three actresses (Miss McDonald, Miss Rashad, and Sanaa Lathan as Walter Lee's sister) provide two outstanding performances and one that's efficient enough plus something of a crowd pleaser. The customers whoop and holler and gasp at every twist and turn. Indeed, they're far more expressive than Puffy. Certainly they communicate a wider range of emotion. They're especially responsive to the comedy, even when Leon's direction doesn't really merit it.

Though it's a period piece, *Raisin* foreshadowed the evolution of black identity in the decade ahead, and the policy of consciously adopted "Africanization." So Beneatha has a Nigerian boyfriend. In this production, he has a Caribbean accent. It would be nice to think this was a subtle barb at the lazy contrivance of "African-American" identity, but more likely it's just a mistake nobody cares about.

But that kind of broadly drawn cartoon approach to the comedy infects the play's tragic moments, too. Perhaps because Leon over-emphasizes the yuks, perhaps for reasons way beyond his control, the audience is unsure of how to read the darker stuff. When Ruth tells her mother-in-law she's pregnant but that she's thinking of ending it and has already given a down payment to the local abortionist, it's an admission of defeat. Her dream has been deferred so often she's tired of hoping. Better to get rid of her child now than to bring him into the world to be yet another shriveled raisin in the sun.

And what's eerie is the palpable feeling that half the theater feels none of what the author intended. When I read Peggy Noonan's account in *The Wall Street Journal* of how the audience applauded and cheered this moment, I wondered about it. No other critic had mentioned it. Perhaps they saw it on press nights too stuffed with reviewers, backers, and hangers-on for the scene to elicit cheers. Or perhaps they felt it was no big deal. But, when I caught up with *Raisin* a couple of days later, the abortion scene did indeed draw applause and a whoop or two.

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And it was clear that for most of the audience this was a moment of liberation for Ruth, of self-affirmation. This, too, is what we might call the Puffy effect, the hip-hop-perization of black culture, wherein everything is an act of self-affirmation—having a hit record, getting an abortion. I think Lorraine Hansberry would be horrified at how, in the blink of a moment, the moral questions of her play are no longer understood as such. These days, we're the raisin in the sun.

Over at Studio 54, they have the opposite problem: a controversial show that isn't in the least. *Assassins* is a "revue" about the men and women who've tried to kill American presidents, from Lincoln to Reagan. It was supposed to open a couple of weeks after 9/11, and despite a bit of pro forma bluster about its relevance to a wounded Manhattan—"An experience like this makes me want to produce it more than ever," said Todd Haines of the Roundabout Theatre—it was decided discretion was the better part of valor. September 11, remember, came a century almost to the day after President McKinley was assassinated by an anarchist—anarchists being the Islamist terrorists of the age, at least in their general disaffection with the modern capitalist state. The symmetry between the two events might be even more explicit had the current President not chanced to be in Florida and the fourth plane not dawdled around so much that its brave passengers prevented it reaching the White House. Even so, it was felt that Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's theme—that the urge to kill a President is merely the dark underbelly of the American dream—was felt to be too "challenging" in the autumn of 2001.

As I said here at the time, soon enough we'd be back to business as usual and it could safely take its place as just another of Broadway's faux provocations. Lo and behold, two and a half years later, here we are. *Assassins* is a musical that professes to ask the big questions, but the only question you'll leave Studio 54 asking is: What the hell was all the fuss about? Sondheim and Weidman sell themselves as the brave pioneers of a musical theater that's more than just showbiz polish, but, in fact, showbiz polish is all this musical has to offer. You notice that in this revival precisely because Joe Mantello's production is so unpolished. Robert Brill's set is a cross between a fairground (complete with neon exhortations to SHOOT! and WIN!), a steel pier, and the towering hulk of some dark satanic mill from the nineteenth century: it's less of a set than an obstruction, shoving the players to the lip of the stage and leaving them to shove the play at us. The pit band has a thin tinny sound which someone somewhere no doubt intended to evoke Brecht & Weill but which instead does a great disservice to Sondheim's score, a series of black variations on a century's worth of the most innocent American song forms, from the cakewalk to soupy Seventies soft rock. As for the lyrics, many of the best lines get lost in too many muffled indistinct readings. You miss the showbiz polish because, without it, there's no there there. This is supposedly a show for people who want deep musicals, but its pleasures are all on the surface.

Here's the thesis, spelled out by the fairground barker:

> No job? Cupboard bare?
> One room, no one there?
> Hey, pal, don't despair
> You wanna shoot a President?

And as John Wilkes Booth croons: "Ev'rybody's got the right to be happy./ No-one can be put in jail for your dreams."

And that's it. In a culture dedicated to making it, those who can't have one last shot, so to speak: they can kill the chief and live out their own dark variation on the right to pursue happiness. As Big Ideas go, this one barely limps to the end of the first page of the script, but Sondheim and Weidman do their best to give it an air of plausibility. A slyly insinuating carousel waltz of "Hail to the Chief" conjures the Presidential assassins as romantic obsessives, and the show's format allows John Wilkes Booth and Leon

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Czolsgosz to bump up against John Hinckley and Squeaky Fromme, Victorian frock coats and groovy Seventies pant suits pacing the floor together in one all-time great conspiracy meeting. But, for all that, Sondheim and Weidman are firing blanks.

Each chief-shooter gets a scene and/or a song. Fans of the show gush about Sondheim, but it's John Weidman's book that provides most of the entertainment. Sometimes it's just the merest amendment of the historical record: an ever more frustrated John Hinckley pumping more and more rounds into a beaming and apparently indestructible Ronald Reagan, who shrugs off each bullet with some new quip. Occasionally, it's a thing of beauty, like the profane soliloquy dictated into a cassette machine by Sam Byck, winningly played with dingy élan by Mario Cantone in a grubby sidewalk Santa suit.

Byck, in case you've forgotten, had a grand scheme to fly a plane into the White House and kill Nixon. But, before setting off, he sent audio tapes to various figures of the day. His message to Leonard Bernstein, famed for his success in both "classical and semi-classical music," begins by acknowledging that Lenny may be too busy to listen to it today but perhaps "you can listen to it Tonight! Tonight!" The show's having a little fun here at the expense of Sondheim's first hit show all those years ago. After advising Lenny to stick to love songs, Byck marvels: "What a sentiment! 'Tonight, tonight, I'll meet my love tonight.' Where is she, Lenny?"

What larks! We're all laughing so much, we hardly mind that the advertised journey into the heart of darkness has turned into an evening of glib pastiche and showbiz jokes. Insofar as there's any dramatic arc, it's toward an inevitable rendezvous with fate in the Texas Book Depository, where the Booths and Bycks, the hits and misses, gather together to spur on a reluctant Lee Harvey Oswald. A decade or so back, asked why we remember the killers of Lincoln and Kennedy but not those of Garfield and McKinley, Sondheim replied that it's because Lincoln and Kennedy were important Presidents. This seems a little too easy, as well as unfair to McKinley, not to mention an implicit acknowledgment that the play's premise—that there's something binding Oswald to the mentally ill Charles Guiteau (Garfield) and the ulcer-plagued Giuseppe Zangara (FDR) and the Manson-worshipping Squeaky Fromme (Ford)—is a lot of bunk. But for the 1992 London premiere, recognizing that he couldn't just play JFK for laughs like he could McKinley and Garfield, Sondheim wrote a morose ballad called "Something Just Broke," a musicalization of the cliché—that everyone remembers where he was at the moment he heard the news. Salesmen, farmers, housewives, they step forward, gaze into the distance, and try to articulate their numbness:

> Something Just Broke.
> Something I wish I hadn't heard
> Something bewildering occurred.

As often with Sondheim, it seems too pat, too organized to express genuine feeling. I remember strongly disliking the song in 1992, when it seemed a transparent preemptive strike against accusations that everything else in the show was cynical and heartless. I preferred the equivalent scene in John Updike's *Couples*, where the swingers are momentarily taken aback but decide to go ahead with that evening's cocktail party anyway. Twelve years on, in the wake of 9/11, the tone of "Something Just Broke" seems even more wrong—passive, inert, a nation of droning victims. There's any number of lively funny moments in *Assassins*. But, in all its obtrusively rhymed generalities, it's this song—the sole head-on play-it-straight number—that seems at last to answer the question: How can a couple of smart guys like Sondheim and Weidman have so little to say? Perhaps because they don't understand their subject—America.

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Art

Byzantium at the Metropolitan

by Karen Wilkin

It's hard to decide what is most remarkable about "Byzantium: Faith and Power, 1261–1557," at the Metropolitan Museum.[1] It's astonishing that the museum has once again assembled an extraordinary group of rarely or never-before-seen treasures—icons, manuscripts, textiles, architectural fragments, and more—many from obscure, remote collections in troubled places. (This is the third in the Met's series of exhibitions examining, chronologically, the achievements of the Eastern empire of Constantinople and the Greek Christian world.) Even more astonishing is that any of the diverse works in the show survived or that they were made in the first place, given the turbulent history of the period under review. The opulent survey encompasses the turbulent history of the final two centuries of the Byzantine empire and the first century of its posthumous influence. The starting date, 1261, marks the restoration of Greek political and religious power to the Eastern Christian world after the more than half-century of hated Frankish rule that followed the brutal sack of Constantinople by the Venetians during the Fourth Crusade. (It wasn't just the infidel that the crusaders went after. For evidence of Venetian looting, see, for starters, the four great bronze horses that until recently stood above the main portal of San Marco. For an immensely readable account of the complicated history of the Greek Christian empire, see John Julius Norwich's *Short History of Byzantium*.) The closing date, 1557, more than a century after Constantinople definitively fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, marks the first local use of the term Byzantium and brackets what Helen C. Evans, the exhibition's curator, describes as the period when "the Ottoman Turks, Russia, and other western states sought to inherit the mantle of the New Rome, Constantinople, through their adaptation of its art and culture."

In the summer of 1261, an army sent by the Byzantine general, the emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos, at last defeated the Franks—more or less by accident, but that's another matter. On August 15, the emperor entered Constantinople, bearing an icon of the Virgin Hodegetria—"she who points the way"—universally believed to have been painted by Saint Luke himself.

The two centuries following 1261 could be called a "Byzantine renaissance"—lower case "r" to separate it from the more or less contemporaneous burst of creativity in the Latin West—think of Italy in the trecento and quattrocento. The religious art of late Byzantium is conspicuously unmarked by the key element of most Renaissance art elsewhere: a fascination with the appearances of the natural world and with pagan Graeco-Roman prototypes. The formal,

1 "Byzantium: Faith and Power, 1261–1557" opened at the Metropolitan Museum on March 23 and remains on view through July 4, 2004. A catalogue of the exhibition, published by the museum, is available from Yale University Press (680 pages, $75).

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stylized ecclesiastical art of the "Byzantine renaissance" had enormous repercussions. Its distinctive manner was adopted and emulated throughout the Eastern Christian world, along with other aspects of Byzantine culture, as emblematic of civilization and power. Eventually, although for quite different reasons, the art of Byzantium made its influence felt in the Latin West, as well. By focusing on objects produced for the Greek Orthodox church, "Byzantium: Faith and Power" vividly brings to life the richness and variety of the late Byzantine tradition in all its aspects. Sections of the installation devoted to objects made in Constantinople, in the empire's provinces, and in far-flung, not quite assimilated regions document the permutations of the dominant manner, while a careful selection of works from still other sources bears witness to the influence of Byzantine style and substance beyond the boundaries of the Greek Christian world.

Seven years in the making, involving the participation of just about all the countries in the former Greek sphere, from Greece to the Balkans to Russia to Egypt, "Byzantium: Faith and Power" demanded time and concentration, not to mention diplomatic adroitness, from its organizers. Not surprisingly, then, the large, complicated exhibition they achieved demands time and concentration of the visitor. Many of the most fascinating, illuminating works on exhibit are small and complex. Many depend on your recognizing specific types, identifying their meanings, and being attentive to small deviations from the Ur-form. It can be taxing. Icons, are, after all, iconic. Repetition, formality, and consistency are part of their power, but there are moments when the subtle differences between various types of Virgins—between "she who points the way" and "cessation of sorrow," say—are far less visible than their stylized similarities. The mind sometimes wanders. The repeated appearances of an inseparable pair of Russian saints named Boris and Gleb can take on distinctly Monty Python-esque connotations; then sobriety returns. The Met's installation of mosaics, frescos, illuminated manuscripts, liturgical objects, textiles, bits of architecture and sculpture, and, yes, icons helps to clarify the more obscure aspects of the exhibition's difficult subject by grouping works according to such broad topics as public and private devotion, the role of icons, the cross-connections between Byzantium and competing nations, and more. And there is also the occasional odd-ball inclusion that acts like a sorbet course, to refresh the palette and sharpen your appetite for more.

If, for example, you tire of the nuances of metal icon revetments—those elaborately worked, imprisoning surrounds of silver-gilt—you can ponder the impulse that attached a pair of immense seed pearl chandelier earrings on either side of a Virgin's head, one well outside the edge of her veil, the other nearly obscuring the Christ Child's face, which is already compromised by a border of pearls. (The label helpfully notes that the jewelry was a later Russian addition to a fourteenth-century object probably made in Constantinople.)

If, in the section dedicated to luxurious objects for private devotions, you are horrified by the finicky labor and the potential eyestrain required to complete one of the exhibition's miniature mosaic icons, with their inconceivably tiny tesserae, you can think instead about the cultural palimpsest created when a late thirteenth- to early fourteenth-century Byzantine mosaic of the Man of Sorrows is set in a perfectly amazing late fourteenth-century case, paved with neatly wrapped and labeled relics, each in its own custom cubbyhole. And if this isn't enough, there is a simply staggering chandelier, a great fifteen-foot-high extravaganza of chains, filigree crosses, hooks, candleholders, and bands of elaborate openwork, ornamented with fabulous heraldic beasts—Byzantine thirteenth- to fourteenth-century, the label says, although it would look right at home among the complex tile and stucco decorations of any Islamic interior. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

The exhibition begins by evoking Michael VIII Palaiologos's triumphant August entry

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into Constantinople by confronting you with a large icon of the Virgin and Child, surrounded by "feast scenes"—major events in the life of Christ and the Virgin celebrated by the Greek church—and backed by a Crucifixion with the sorrowing Virgin and St. John (second half of the fourteenth-century, Collection of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Istanbul). It's not the one the emperor carried in 1261 nor, it turns out, is it even the same type, but it is a spectacular object nonetheless. The image of the mother and child, for all its stylizations and exaggeratedly slender proportions, is exceptionally appealing and charming. The Virgin seems to kiss her infant's throat, as he reaches up for fistfuls of veil on either side of her face. Ankles decorously crossed in a most unchildlike fashion, he tips his head back against his mother's restraining hand, so far back, in fact, that the two faces seem to fuse into an embodiment of opposition, framed by the arcs of the veil and the child's arms. Nothing in the elegantly rendered scenes surrounding the embracing pair approaches this kind of inventive reconception of type, nor does the Crucifixion on the icon's back, which is distinguished mainly by the way the copious amounts of blood running from the pierced feet echo the Virgin's nifty red shoes.

At first, this painting's combination of the codified and the unexpected seems anomalous, but later, in a large section devoted to the role of icons within church ritual and private worship, you come upon other devotional paintings with similar qualities, particularly compelling works that suggest that, at least occasionally, powerful talents could enlarge the possibilities of convention without forfeiting any of the potency of the ritualized and the familiar. For the non-specialist in Byzantine art (and maybe for the specialist, as well), such works offer considerable pleasure for their own merits and relief from the typical. An exquisite sixteenth-century Russian icon of the Nativity, from the State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow, for example, is at once obedient to Byzantine archetypes and utterly fresh. There is nothing unprecedented about the iconography, yet neither is there anything standardized about the eloquent silhouettes of the centralized Virgin, reclining on a brilliant vermilion bed, the approaching Magi, with their arch-necked horses and fluttering capes, or the attendant angels looming from behind the mountainous background. The fur-clad old man haranguing Joseph, the shepherd blowing his horn, and the overscaled seated woman who prepares the Child's bath are all familiar characters in Nativity icons, yet they are treated in ways that seem positively casual and anecdotal. The icon's dynamic choreography of crisp shapes in dazzling red, dull purple, and molten darks is made even livelier by a plentiful use of white and an intricate counterpoint of color and drawing. Most remarkable is a "harlequin" pattern of white and off-white rocks, split with a coarse grid of drawing, scattered like a loose aura around the Virgin. The motif comes into sharp focus in the representation of the Christ Child, tucked into the manger behind his mother, in a cave-*cum*-stable, watched by an attentive ox and ass.

The exhibition's illuminated manuscripts and liturgical textiles, plus a few tantalizing architectural fragments, provide ample proof that it was possible for truly inventive Byzantine artists to wrestle expressive power out of codified types, no matter what their medium or the scale of their efforts. In a robustly carved relief from a now destroyed late Byzantine tomb, for example, the Archangel Michael, his head purposefully damaged to obliterate his face, spreads his richly feathered wings from the corner of a spandrel panel; his elbow rests on a broad, flattened band of acanthus molding, which springs from an overscaled version of bead and reel, provoking thoughts, not for the first time, of the relationship of the surviving elements of ancient Magna Graecia to Greek Christian religious art and, by extension, of the relationship of Byzantine art to the muscular flattened sculptural motifs of the Romanesque, in the Latin West. A full-bodied, frontal, seated marble Virgin with a smil-

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ing Child, from Serbia (1312–1316, Sokolica Monastery, Kosovo), combines rigidity, informality, and stylization with a lingering classicism and incipient naturalism. This implacable and enchanting sculpture is one of the most unforgettable works in the show.

It's also hard to forget a gold embroidered Epitaphios—a liturgical cloth with an image of the dead Christ (last quarter of the fourteenth century, the Holy Monastery of the Transfiguration, Meteora, Kalambaka, Greece). In this example, the pale recumbent figure stretches nearly edge to edge against the dark red ground, floating on an expanse of golden stars. Angels, some in Martha Graham postures, and a seraph hover above and below, along with symbolic interlaced winged wheels, studded with eyes; the symbols of the four Evangelists shoot in from the corners. Matisse and Miró would have loved it. They probably would have loved, too, the exhibition's Armenian manuscripts, which stand out even in an impressive selection assembled from collections around the world: superb pages from Byzantine Gospel books (everything from Evangelist portraits to intricate canon tables to dramatic visions of the Transfiguration), arresting Coptic illuminations notable for their simplified shapes and intense color, and European miniatures of ravishing delicacy that demonstrate the influence of Byzantine types. Yet the incisive drawing, surprising color, and staccato patterns of the Armenian illuminations set them apart. A pair of facing pages of the Three Marys at the Tomb and the Harrowing of Hell (1455, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore) from a Gospel produced by Priest Khach'atur, illuminator, and Priest Yohannes, scribe, seems to conflate Islamic style and Christian iconography into a riot of rhythmic patterns, looping drapery, and lively contours, made more sumptuous by contrasts of pink, green, and brick reds. (And it's hard to resist the smart yellow boots on Christ and the angel at the tomb.) Produced two years after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks, the manuscript is evidence of continued energy and creativity in the Christian East even after the Islamization of "the New Rome."

A small but illuminating section of "Byzantium: Faith and Power" examines just this kind of overlapping and fusion of Islamic and Christian style, both before and after the fall of Constantinople, through objects as diverse as a Syrian glass bottle, from the mid-thirteenth century, with scenes of monastic life (Furussiya Arts Foundation, Vaduz) or an otherwise wholly Islamic-style Anatolian dagger from same period (and the same collection), whose Christian associations are limited to a depiction of the hand of God and an ambiguous motif on the hilt, which may or may not be a cross. Even more ambiguous is an interlace page from a Coptic illuminated Book of Isaiah (1373, Patriarchate Library, Cairo) that in any other context would read simply as typically Islamic exuberant decoration. That influence flows two ways is attested to by a delightful illustration from the Arabic manuscript the "Compendium of Chronicles" (1314–1315, Edinburgh University Library), in which the birth of the Prophet Muhammad is rendered more or less as a Nativity, with angels receiving the swaddled baby; only the absence of the ox and ass, the substitution of three elegantly dressed women for the shepherds, and the turban on the "Joseph" figure suggest that Islam, not Christianity, inspired the image. The lesson, however, is clear; the divisions between cultures and beliefs were once far less clearly defined than today.

The last section of "Byzantium: Faith and Power" is almost a major exhibition in itself. It examines the influence of Byzantium on the art of the Latin West, arguing persuasively that European devotional painting owes more to Greek prototypes than is usually acknowledged. That there was interchange between the Latin West and the Greek East, via the usual routes of diplomatic missions, state and non-state visits, occasional intermarriages, wars, and pillaging, is not news; what is special about this aspect of the show is its unequivocal demonstration of the effect of particular Byzantine antecedents on a group of well-

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known, significant European paintings, mostly from the fifteenth century, from the Netherlands and Italy.

Several main themes are explored. The first, illustrated mainly with manuscripts, is the role of the mendicant monastic orders in fostering exchange between East and West. The second, embodied by an impressive selection of paintings, is the influence of two iconic types: the frontal, disembodied head of Christ associated with Veronica's veil, and the image of Virgin and Child of the type known as "the compassionate one" or "tender kissing." A third, closely related notion concerns permutations of the motif of Saint Luke painting the Virgin; some of the most influential Byzantine icons brought to the West were believed to be the work of Saint Luke, patron saint of painters. In this context, after the crash course in icons provided by the earlier parts of the exhibition, the European painters' choice of motifs takes on fresh significance. Hans Memling's frontal, hieratic "portrait bust," *Christ Giving His Blessing* (1481, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), for example, reveals itself as a close cousin of Netherlandish depictions of Veronica's veil inspired by icons depicting the sacred image.

Most fascinating, perhaps because of the stellar selection of paintings assembled to make the point, is the section devoted to the way Western painters translated the severe, codified image of the Virgin from Byzantine icons into a subtly modeled evocation of an eminently human young woman and her lively baby. The exhibition makes clear the effect a sloe-eyed Virgin of Tenderness (the cheek-to-cheek type, in this instance, with a wriggling baby clutching his mother's chin and the edge of her veil), brought to Cambrai from Rome in 1440 and soon the focus of intense devotion, venerated as having been painted by Saint Luke. To present-day eyes, the picture looks more like a trecento Italian Madonna than a hieratic Virgin Eleousa of Byzantium, so it is not surprising to learn that it is currently designated as "Italo-Byzantine," no longer attributed to Saint Luke, and generally believed to be a mid-fourteenth century Italian copy of a Byzantine icon, now lost. (A faithful copy of an icon was supposed to possess the same miraculous power as the original—hence the premium placed on accurate repetition of types.) The widespread influence of the *Cambrai Madonna* (*c.* 1340, Cathédrale de Cambrai, France) in its day is clearly reflected in the exhibition's selection of paintings of the Virgin and Child by the fifteenth-century Netherlandish masters Rogier van der Weyden and Gerard David, by van Eyck's workshop, and by some less well-known, but highly accomplished contemporaries of these luminaries, including several manuscript illuminators. The thrilling presence of Rogier van der Weyden's magnificent *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin* (*c.* 1435–1440, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) and Jan van Eyck's endlessly compelling *Virgin and Child with Saints Barbara and Elizabeth and Jan Vos* (*c.* 1441–1443, The Frick Collection, New York)—a pairing almost alone worth a visit to the show—eloquently allows you to see how these motifs were made wholly current in mid-fifteenth-century terms. In both of these celebrated pictures, religious intensity and otherworldliness is expressed not through formality and simplification, as it is in the icons that are ultimately their sources, but by a wealth of detail, a rejoicing in the minutiae of this world, accounted for in sharper focus than the eye can perceive through the magical transubstantiation of paint into silk, tile, brocade, fur, and more. A florid *Saint Luke Drawing the Virgin* (*c.* 1520, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), by the mannerist Jan Gossaert, known as Mabuse, attests to the persistence of the motif, complete with a wriggling baby who grasps his mother's chin. And a few splendid works by El Greco are at once a kind of curatorial in-joke and a serious reminder that Byzantine traditions informed the intensely spiritual Counter-Reformation art of Domenikos Theotokopoulos, trained initially as an icon painter in his native Crete; it can even be argued that the expressive poses and flicker-

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ing light that distinguishes his strongest work from start to finish are echoes of the formalized attitudes and crackling gold highlights of the icons he painted as a very young man.

The end of "Byzantium: Faith and Power" returns you once again to the Palaiologans, who began it all in 1261, through a series of fascinating images of the Byzantine emperor John VIII, made in connection with his visit to Florence and Ferrara in 1438–1439. The occasion was yet another one of those ill-fated conferences intended to bring the Latin and Greek churches together—or at least to try to keep them from making war on one another. The emperor's appearance and costumes fascinated the Italians, as a superb, life-sized portrait bust in bronze, either by Antonio Filarete or Donatello, attests (1439, Vatican Museums, Vatican City). Most engaging, most revealing, and most immediate are Pisanello's lively pen and ink sketches of John VIII and his retinue (1438–1439, Musée du Louvre, Paris). Almost certainly done from life, in a sense they signal the end of Byzantine art and the advent of new aesthetic desiderata that give preference to evoking even the sacred in terms of observable actuality. It's a far cry from the stylized Virgin and Child of the icon that begins the exhibition, inventive as that image is in Byzantine terms—and yet, as *Byzantium: Faith and Power* asserts, too, the essential aspects of that icon will find their way into the new concerns of Renaissance painters. Nothing important is ever lost.

Exhibition note

"Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser"
at the Cooper-Hewitt,
National Design Museum,
New York, March 5–July 25, 2004.

The strange career of Christopher Dresser can be summed up in a frieze and a teapot, both on view at the Cooper-Hewitt. The frieze shows an outlandish convocation of stick insects, wobbling forward in mock procession. Here the insect kingdom is, literally, a kingdom: the bugs' antennae are drawn up to form crowns and their iridescent green wings unfurl like royal robes of state, while tridents gripped in bony limbs serve as scepters. Here is that curious Victorian impulse to wed the comical and the nightmarish; Dresser dubbed the frieze "Old Bogey." An altogether different sensibility pervades the teapot. No more than a silver square, it sits diagonally, two of its sides extending to form spout and handle. A smaller square is cut out of the middle, placing a void at the pot's center of gravity that declares the axis around which it rotates and pours. Unlike the botanic-insectile phantasmagoria of Old Bogey, this is as laconic as a geometric proof.

It seems impossible that these works could come from the same civilization, let alone the same man. Yet each is an absolutely characteristic product of Christopher Dresser's mind. Such is the revelation of the Cooper-Hewitt's "Shock of the Old: Christopher Dresser's Design Revolution," an exhibition organized for the centenary of his death. The rather generic title is unfortunate for the story is anything but generic. It is nothing less than the cultural revolution in which the High Victorian suddenly disintegrated, its components of truth, energy, and muscularity flying apart and improbably reconstituting themselves as delicacy, restraint, and abstraction, reawakening as the Aesthetic Movement.

Christopher Dresser (1834–1904) was born in Glasgow the same year as William Morris, the great arts and crafts innovator. The central fact of each of their lives was the crisis of labor brought about by the Industrial Revolution, to which they responded in opposite ways—Morris by seeking to revive craft traditions through socialism and workingmen's cooperatives, Dresser by accepting the strange products of modern industry, and trying to make them beautiful. This was the mission of the Government School of Design in London, where Dresser studied for seven years.

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His mentor was Owen Jones, the celebrated scholar of color, who designed the intense chromatic scheme of the Crystal Palace for the Great Exhibition of 1851. Jones admired the encyclopedic scope of the exhibition, comprising the products of the entire world, and he applied its approach to his celebrated *Grammar of Ornament* (1856). This compendium brought together all the decorative traditions of the world, from Egyptian wall decoration to the linear patterns of Maori clubs. Jones summarized the principles of each culture, extrapolating from them universal principles of design and color. Here was Victorian confidence at its most optimistic and curious, believing that the entire world was knowable and could be turned to the great work of progress.

Dresser contributed to the *Grammar of Ornament* a set of botanical illustrations, his specialty. Upon completing his studies, he lectured in botany and produced several books on plant taxonomy, such as *Unity in Variety as Deduced from the Vegetable Kingdom* (1859), which echoed Jones's search for universal principles, which he found in plant forms. Throughout his career, Dresser derived his ornamental ideas from his studies into the growth and structure of plants. Dresser did not copy nature with subservient fidelity—this was the stultifying dogma of prim John Ruskin and the pre-Raphaelites. Instead Dresser argued that one should abstract from nature and make stylized forms, and that drawing should be a creative affair rather than one of copying. Here he turned the tables on his class-conscious tutors, who had permitted no life drawing at the School of Design, because it might encourage their pupils to think above their station in life to aspire to the status of artists. In revenge, Dresser made the creation of ornament a supremely intellectual achievement. Perhaps this helps explain the alert, nervous angularity of his mature work, always implying constant restless thought.

And restless indeed was Dresser's mind, which he turned to utilitarian objects of every possible category—pots and vases, benches and toast racks, hat stands and wallpapers. So active was his ornamental imagination that when there were no physical object to design, his brain kept working, filling pages with decorative squiggles and flourishes, babbling forth in a kind of ornamental glossolalia, the nonsense syllables of industrial design. Dresser's international celebrity was secured with a trio of influential books: *The Art of Decorative Design* (1862), *Principles of Decorative Design* (1873), and *Studies in Design* (1874–1876). These were prodigies of rationality that would have brought credit on the Bauhaus, as when Dresser calculated the proper angle of inclination for a spout. But these same rational objects were vigorously ornamented, following that principle that Victorian slang called "go," the physical expression of inner vitality. This quality pervades his early work, of which the exhibition gathers a superb array, such as the cast-iron furniture he designed for middle-class buyers. Here his decorative squiggles were realized in liquid cast iron, enlisted to serve as the backs of chairs or the cocky frontispiece of an umbrella stand.

Even his contemporaries felt that Dresser was at the outer limits of Victorian taste, and one critic wrote perceptively in 1874 of "a certain spiky uncomfortability" in his work. Having plumbed the limits of ornamental energy, he now abruptly shifted his attention to the expressive potential of restraint. The crucial event was his trip to the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. There he met Frank Furness, his closest American counterpart. Furness was in close contact with the Japanese delegation to the Centennial, and evidently brought them into contact with Dresser; at any rate, Dresser accompanied the party back to Japan where he remained three months. Upon his return, his work was instantly transformed. The artist best known for his limitless decorative imagination now began to make objects whose most salient

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feature was that they had no decoration at all. So daring are the products of the immediate post-Japan phase, such as the teapot mentioned above, that they are nearly undatable. When the Italian firm Alessi reintroduced many of them in 1991, they seemed more modern than a good many similar products on the market.

Of course, Dresser's turn to geometric abstraction was in the air, and contemporaries such as Morris and E. W. Godwin were likewise moving from high medievalism to Japanese forms. But Dresser stood apart. His early schooling in botany gave him a kinetic sense for the life of forms that these architects lacked. A glance at his splendid late vases and pots makes this clear. Although reduced to a minimum of formal elements, and purged of decoration, they remain Victorian in their sense of implied force. The gripping, clutching action of handles; the aspiring, axial reach of spouts; the anchoring role of base and feet: each of these Dresser seems to have felt with unusual tactile empathy. Dresser found in the simple lines of growth and support an infinite language for expressing passion.

The decision to split the exhibition across two levels, before and after Japan, must reflect the spatial constraints of the museum, but it succeeds wildly; seldom is a straightforward chronological sequence so inherently dramatic. A suggestion: viewers who find the pre-Japan work too gawky and overheated ought to view the exhibition in reverse order. The chromatic and textural richness of Dresser's work is overwhelming at first sight, and one misses the strong formal structure that underlies all his work. A reverse tour captures its fundamental coherence. In every respect, this is a model exhibition. If the dense, rather baronial décor of the Cooper-Hewitt clashes a bit with Dresser's feeling for the living line, it only underscores how fresh and graceful his productions would have appeared in their late Victorian context. I should add that there is also a lovely and intelligent catalogue, which does full justice to Dresser's subtle color; our cup runneth over.

—Michael J. Lewis

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Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

If you spotted a crazed man shouting hosannas and hallelujahs up Madison Avenue the other day, that was me. What can I say? A great season for art has descended upon New York. No, it has nothing to do with the 2004 Whitney Biennial. This year's Whitney survey, campy and escapist, contemporary art zoned-out on I-Pod, was as palatable as an infusion of hemlock mixed by the Kool-Aid Man. The one thing to be said of the flashing, blinking, inflatable nothing was that its website crashed in Internet Explorer. So *The New Yorker*'s art reviewer called it "startlingly good" and better than anyone "could have expected"? That's Stockholm Syndrome for you.

But salvation is here. A host of exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum alone will take up half your summer. The other half should go to the galleries. Those bullish precincts of capitalism, what do you know, are organizing some of the best shows of art right now.

Up the stairs on the second floor of Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, off the sweating pavement of Seventy-ninth Street, I experienced the single best gallery moment—maybe ever. Here in two hushed galleries, painted a deep red, windows blacked out, is the first American exhibition dedicated to the sky studies of John Constable, RA (1776–1837).[1] With more than twenty-five works assembled from museums and private collections, including the two from the Frick Collection, and not one for sale—not a one!—the experience is total and soaring, perfect. A number of Constable's breezy big-sky landscape compositions are paired to his more formal, all-sky "Cloud Studies." Constable undertook his "skying" campaigns in 1821 and 1822 upon relocating to Hampstead, a summer retreat five miles north of London. He scribbled the date and the time of day on the reverse of many of his studies and landscapes, even including some meteorological notes: "31st Sepr 10–11 o'clock morning looking Eastward a gentle wind to East" he wrote on the puffy *Cloud Study* from the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (he got something wrong: thirty days hath September).

Taken together, these Studies create a comprehensive, sublime record of a time and place—mainly Hampstead, summer of 1822. The gallery director Stephen Harvey suggested that to escape the New York heat one could do worse than spend it in this air-conditioned ether. I agree. And I am bringing a picnic blanket.

The catalogue is rewarding in its own right. Here are essays on Constable's biography, his religious commitments (informed by William Paley's *Natural Theology* [1802]), the early nineteenth-century science of clouds (Luke Howard's Latin nomencla-

1 "Constable's Skies" opened at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York, on May 5 and remains on view through June 25, 2004. A 188-page catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Frederic Bancroft, is available for purchase from the gallery.

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ture of cloud types was first published in 1803; his *Climate of London* in 1818), exhaustive scientific analyses of Constable's paint and paper, and even contemporary poetry.

One essay that stands apart from the rest is a contribution from Leon Wieseltier, the Literary Editor of *The New Republic*. Wieseltier's embrace of—I don't even know what . . . secularism? radical anti-spiritualism? disestablishmentarianism?—is so total that he cannot come to grips with Constable's spiritual interest in the natural world, as explained cogently in a number of other essays in this catalogue. The coy title of Wieseltier effort, "Spirit in the Sky"—with its reference to a 1960s pop song—illustrates Wieseltier's antipathy to Constable's sensibility.

> But the soul, like the eye, does not wish to be fooled forever . . . the desacralization of the sky was begun. . . . Constable wanted also to diminish the romance of art. . . . They are not reveries, they are analyses. . . . These are emblems of passing, and utterly unsentimental ones. . . . Constable's cloud studies . . . are exercises in an emancipation from the tyranny of matter.

Is this an aging radical's idea of a joke?

The coup de grâce is Wieseltier's contempt for Constable's "piety." He quotes from Constable's final lecture at Hampstead: "Our wisest and best teachers, the sculptures themselves teach us, that our Maker is most seen in his work—and best adored in our wonder and admiration of them." To this Wieseltier adds: "The words seem simple and anachronistic, but they are sincere."

One could offer a couple words in response to Wieseltier—simple, anachronistic, sincere—but Constable's sky paintings speak for themselves.

Guy Pène du Bois (1884–1958), the American artist, New-York born, did not fare well in the contest of twentieth-century modernism. His graphic style—realistic and volumetric—and his choice of subject matter—glamorous, urbane genre scenes satirically rendered—put him at odds with the trends of modernism as early as The Armory Show of 1913. In a painting of 1950, called *Another Expulsion*, Pène du Bois captured the feeling with typical aplomb: a Piccassoid character expels two Masaccio-like figures of Adam and Eve from the temple as the circus freaks of modernism enter behind. That temple might just as well be The Museum of Modern Art.

James Graham & Sons has undertaken an extensive two-part survey of this artist, the first part of which is now on display, the second to go up in the Spring of 2006.[2] An inclusive catalogue, with a retrospective essay by Betsy Fahlman, accompanies the show. Here is another example of a gallery doing just the right thing in a world of wrongs. A number of excellent Pène du Bois drawings from 1914 and 1915—smart and witty as anything he accomplished—are on loan from the Whitney Museum vaults. Don't expect these works to see the light of day again anytime soon, except on the Whitney auction block. The scenes are perfect Pène du Bois. In one drawing called "Can You Act?" (1914), with dialogue written in pencil, a movie director presses the question on an aspiring star. Her reply: "Sure—I jumped from High Bridge once."

Pène du Bois studied art at the New York School of Art. His teachers at the turn of the century were William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri. His classmates: Edward Hopper, Rockwell Kent, and George Bellows. You can see a common style running through their early work—brushy, dark, focused on the theater of modern life. It was not until the late 1910s that Pène du Bois arrived at his signature style: smooth, rounded, ballooning figures, the men stuffed into tuxedos, the women, mannequin-like. As in the sculpture of Elie Nadelman, makeup and fashion play a key role in the drama. You

2 "Guy Pène du Bois: Painter of Modern Life," the first of a two-part show, opened at James Graham & Sons, New York, on May 6 and remains on view through July 9, 2004. A catalogue is available at the gallery and from Quantuck Lane Press (176 pages, $39.95).

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won't find any better example of this than in Pène du Bois's sensuous painting *The Sisters* (1919). Twentieth-century modernism be damned—this is great work.

The Italian-Scotsman Eduardo Paolozzi (born 1922) was a forerunner of the British Pop Art movement, a member of The Independent Group in the early 1950s, and someone whose notions of mass culture were marketed to great effect by Andy Warhol. This is all true. But one can also make the case that Paolozzi, the John Soane of twentieth-century junk, cast his net more widely and more intelligently than American Pop. He never disabused himself of the rooted traditions of European modernism. He also came to reject mass culture, as taken only on its own terms, and the movement with which he is now associated.

A small show at Flowers, the New York outlet of the British gallery chain, assembles two sets of Paolozzi collages from the late 1940s and early 1950s.[3] The first matches images of classical statuary with diagrams of machines; the pairing of the two has always been a preoccupation of Paolozzi's sculptural program. Some of his most recent busts and abstract assemblies are available for view, if you ask, in the gallery offices, and you can see his connection to Alberto Giacometti in this work. The second set of collages, horizontal cut-ups of magazine portraits, owes a debt to synthetic cubism. Most of these collages have been assembled from *Time* magazine covers. The effect can be chilling, with lines and hatch-marks scribbled in as though part of a physiognomial grand plan. Paolozzi's take on Eugene Dennis, Communist Party boss, in *To Rule is to Take Orders* (1952) is downright diabolical. To our disenchanted gaze, this work is more affecting than his consumer-based, candy-colored work as collected in the BUNK! portfolios of 1972—although these pop icons will always be his most remembered artifacts.

3 "Eduardo Paolozzi: Works on Paper and Collage" opened at Flowers, New York, on May 14 and remains on view through June 12, 2004.

Collectors of artifacts—books, paintings, furniture, gems and minerals—on a totally different scale have been the fourteen generations and five centuries of the Cavendish family—the earls and dukes of Devonshire, the marquesses of Hartington, and the earls of Burlington—at Chatsworth Settlement in the Peak district of England. The portion of this collection most significant to art history is a set of old-master drawings purchased in 1723 by William, the second duke (1673–1729). A number of Chatsworth Parmigianinos, for example, were lent to the recent Frick exhibition. But the real story here is the history of this eccentric family, now on full display at the Bard Graduate Center as part of a six-city American tour.[4]

The single degrees of separation between this family and the rest of modern history are astounding: Thomas Hobbes was the second earl of Devonshire's tutor and librarian (his handwritten library catalogue of Chatsworth from 1628 is on display); John Smith of Pocahontas fame provided maps of the Cavendish East India investments in Virginia; and Evelyn Waugh sent a printer's binding proof of his biography of Ronald Knox, with nothing but blank pages, to the duchess of Devonshire, the sister of Nancy Mitford. He included this inscription: "For Darling Debo, with love from Evelyn. You will not find a word in this to offend your Protestant sympathies." An excellent gallery guide and catalogue highlight these delights. The catalogue's account of rescuing Chatsworth from an 80 percent inheritance charge, levied in 1950, is alone worth reading. It took seventeen years to satisfy the taxman—the story will sour anyone to progressive taxation. We owe Chatsworth's salvation to Andrew Cavendish, the eleventh duke, who died on May 3, age 84. It is due to his lifetime of effort that Chatsworth remains a triumph.

4 "The Devonshire Inheritance: Five Centuries of Collecting at Chatsworth" opened at the Bard Graduate Center, New York, on March 18 and remains on view through June 20, 2004. A catalogue of the exhibition is available from Art Services International (431 pages, $59.95).

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Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Let's recap the career of André Previn, just briefly: Born in Berlin (name: Priwin). Fled with his family to L.A. Worked in the movies, developing himself as a pianist, conductor, arranger, composer, etc. Won a slew of Oscars by an early age. Became a symphonic conductor, while continuing to play the piano, and compose, and generally dazzle. Got to be something of a celebrity, marrying Mia Farrow, for example. (He is now—yes—Woody Allen's father-in-law.) On top of everything, he writes well—I mean, he writes English prose extremely well. In fact, his writing is like his playing, or conducting: clear, graceful, tidy, musical. This is an able guy, André Previn.

Five years ago, I wrote a piece saying that he was maybe—just maybe—"the great man of music in the world today." A musician should compose, really, that activity being the most important of all musical activities. Daniel Barenboim, a pianist and conductor, is a great man of music, whatever our particular complaints about him—but he does not compose (so far as we know). James Levine is a great man of music—a pianist and conductor—but he has not yet produced a minuet (again, as far as we know). Previn, however, seems never to be far from his manuscript paper.

Lately, his muse has been Anne-Sophie Mutter, the celebrated German violinist who is his wife. He has given her, for example, a concerto, which—through various means—explores his own childhood in Germany. Previn's life has come full circle, you might say: After roaming the world, conquering it, he lives in Munich, with a German wife. His has been an eye-rubbing odyssey.

The musician's latest activity has been to form a trio, known as the Mutter-Previn-Harrell Trio. That is an ordering worth contemplating. Some think the name of the pianist should come first, followed by that of the violinist, followed by that of the cellist (The cellist is always last, regardless.) We have a famous story involving Arthur Rubinstein and Jascha Heifetz. These greats were two-thirds of one of the best trios ever, with the cellist Emanuel Feuermann, and, after his death, Gregor Piatigorsky. But Heifetz's extreme ego and prickliness made chamber life difficult (and eventually, the trio had no choice but to disband). One objection was that Rubinstein's name came first. Rubinstein explained, exasperatedly, "Jascha, if God were the violinist, the bill would still read 'Rubinstein, God, Piatigorsky.'"

The cellist of the Previns' trio is Lynn Harrell, a man whose career seems quieter than it once was. This ensemble visited Carnegie Hall with a concert of three beloved early trios by three great composers: Beethoven's Piano Trio in C minor, Op. 1, No. 3; Brahms's Piano Trio No. 1 in B, Op. 8; and Mendelssohn's Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor, Op. 49. These were youthful flights of genius, and it was good to see them in a

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row (even if they were out of order—chronological order). An acquaintance of mine, hearing about this concert, rolled his eyes and said, "All standards." Yes, but they don't need to be played in an uninteresting or uninspired way.

And they weren't. Before describing the performances, however, I might comment on how our three musicians looked. Previn is seventy-five now, and he seems shorter than ever, especially in comparison with his wife. But there will always be something of the wunderkind about him, the eternally precocious all-purpose musician from Hollywood. Anne-Sophie Mutter, at forty, is more gorgeous than ever, stunning in her command of her instrument (most of the time) and of her person. Lynn Harrell is much changed from the smooth-faced young cellist we once knew. (He is the son of the fine American baritone Mack Harrell, by the way.) At sixty, Harrell is red-bearded and red-mustached, looking somewhat like a younger, trimmer Kris Kringle.

What does this have to do with music, properly speaking? Nothing—but it is a bit of reporting on three prominent musical personalities.

Beethoven's Op. 1, No. 3 is one of his many and great C-minor works, which also include the "Pathétique" piano sonata and the Fifth Symphony. The Mutter-Previn-Harrell Trio did well by it. Mutter considers herself a Beethovenist, having played and recorded all the sonatas, for example. But she is uneven in Beethoven, as she is in other composers. She can lay into him incisively and authoritatively, or she can be sloppy, distracted, annoying. On this occasion, she was authoritative. She was as alert, sensible, and musical as I have heard her in many a moon. As for Harrell, he has always been a rather emotional musician, playing quite Romantically, and sometimes bathetically. (He has this in common with his fellow cellist Yo-Yo Ma.) And, in the first movement of the Beethoven, he was indeed emotional—but not wrongly or unmusically so.

Previn? It seemed that he had been practicing. He exhibited a smooth, fluid pianism. Sometimes he was a little weak, or reticent, and some of his passagework was a bit sluggish. But he is clearly (still) a pianist—in jazz and in classical music—not merely a conductor and composer who plays a bit on the side.

In the Andante movement (which features variations), Mutter was astoundingly sweet-toned, and Harrell contributed handsomely too. The pianist demonstrated a beautiful singing line. Again, however, he tended to be mousy. Here and throughout the concert, he was more successful in slower, more reflective sections than in faster, more bravura ones.

In the third movement (a minuet), Mutter exploited her part brilliantly, and the Finale (Prestissimo) pulsed with passion, while being sufficiently nimble. The two stringed instruments threatened to overwhelm the piano, and Previn would have been wise to play out more, but he was ever elegant. This is a Previn hallmark, in whatever he does.

The Brahms Trio No. 1 is a youthful work, true, and yet it isn't: Brahms revised it significantly in his autumnal years, so that the work is a wonderful hybrid of early Brahms and late. It can be played aggressively, emotionally—almost purplely (to coin a word); or it can be played in a more intricate fashion. Where Previn had anything to do with it, of course, it was intricate.

This work features one of the most beautiful beginnings in all of music (Brahms was good at beginnings, and other things). Previn was a little retiring, but Harrell responded ardently (as he would), gobbing on the portamento. Mutter's phrasing was consistently natural, right-seeming. It was a pity that Previn could not produce enough sound, even though he had the piano's lid all the way up. His playing suggested that he, like the revising Brahms, is in autumnal mode, marriage to Anne-Sophie or not.

In the Scherzo, Harrell was crafty, and, together with Mutter, quite aggressive. Previn went his own way. Tempos in the

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second section of this movement were a little slow, but not saggy. The Adagio was exceptionally slow—and hushed, and moving. When Mutter and Harrell "sang" together, the effect was almost religious; something deep had been touched. The opening of the final movement (Allegro) billowed appropriately, but the group's energy rather ran out, and things got a little weary and plodding.

There had better not be anything weary or plodding about Mendelssohn's Piano Trio No. 1. The composer's youth, impetuosity, and felicity are all over it. Lynn Harrell began with a monster portamento, and we seemed to be in for a session of soupiness. But the first movement came to have fire and agitation (which was fortunate, because its marking is "Molto allegro ed agitato"). The music that begins the Andante, Previn rendered simply and beautifully. The Scherzo jumped, dove, and swam. The three were well coordinated, and they showed a fabulous lightness—a frothiness, really. The Finale was stirring and noble.

This was not a perfect concert—certainly not technically. But it was a touching concert, filled with musicality, with musical maturity. It was a good idea to form this trio, and its members seemed to enjoy belonging to it. There is a great repertory to play, for one thing. And André Previn never runs out of activity, seeming to need a multiplicity of pursuits like air. He has created and led a remarkable musical life. His parents named him after Beethoven: Andreas Ludwig Priwin. He has not had Beethoven's career, no. But it has been a rich career, and it forges ahead.

The big news at the Metropolitan Opera in the last part of the season was Wagner's *Ring*; the Met reprised the Otto Schenk production from the 1980s, and this was a huge success. But more about *The Ring* in a moment.

We had another Otto Schenk production as the season wound down: his *Rusalka*, a Dvořák opera from 1900. Dvořák's operas were once quite popular, *Rusalka* not the least. But these works have fallen out of favor. Musical fashion, like other fashion, is a bit of a mystery. Currently, the operas of Janáček are very much in style: We see *Jenůfa*, *Katya Kabanova*, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, and *The Makropulos Affair* relatively frequently. Almost certainly, Dvořák will again have his day, in the opera house. On his symphonies and chamber music, the sun has never set!

Rusalka is called a "lyric fairy tale," and though it is a fairy tale, it is not ridiculous: It is, in fact, thought-provoking and true-to-life, telling the story of a water nymph—Rusalka—who falls in love with a human being (a prince, no less) and longs to become human, to unite with him. Courtesy of a witch, she achieves her goal, but the bargain is hard: She will be mute in the human world, and should the prince reject her, it will mean hell (literally) for her, and for him. Oh, well.

This opera is known primarily for one aria, the "Song to the Moon," beloved by sopranos ever since its composition. It has been included in countless opera-aria albums, and in many movies and TV shows. Overall, *Rusalka* is watery—borrowing from Wagner's *Rheingold* and *Götterdämmerung*, speaking of *The Ring*—sensuous, and enchanting. It is not without nationalist and modern-sounding touches. Its orchestration is a typical Dvořák one, producing those unmistakable textures. This is a powerful work.

It opens with three Wood Sprites, frolicking about. We think—we must think—of the three Rhinemaidens who open *The Ring*. Just as Wagner's three tease the slimy Alberich, Dvořák's three tease the slimy Water Gnome. All the while, the Sprites sing "ho, ho, ho"—not quite "hojotoho" (the Valkyries' exclamation), but close.

Soon Rusalka appears, and this is a dreamy role in a dreamy opera: Who better to fill it than Renée Fleming, the dreamiest soprano—the dreamiest singer—now going? She makes, indeed, a consummate Rusalka. In this production, she first sang

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up in a tree, a bored teenager who wants to switch "races"—the grass is always greener, perhaps especially at that age. Fleming showed her superb control of breath, which, among other things, translates into superb control of dynamics. Her pushing out of her lower register often seems effortful, but listeners grow accustomed to that.

When it was time for the Song, the moon popped out, right on cue—very Hollywood. And if Renée is singing about the moon, shouldn't she also sing the word "June"? Fleming's rendering of this aria was a little mannered, but, as I frequently point out—especially with regard to this singer—one man's mannerisms are another's endearing characteristics. The Song was slow and milked, but it nevertheless hit the mark. Fleming's A sharp at the end, held forever, was bold, electrifying, great.

Portraying the Water Gnome (Rusalka's father) was Willard White, the Jamaican-born bass. As outfitted in this Schenk production, he looked not at all unlike Alberich and Alberich's equally slimy brother, Mime. White has a sepulchral voice, and we are not always sure where the note is, but he is sturdy and worthy. So he was on this occasion. He grasped the role, too, putting across both the lechery—he goes for those Wood Sprites—and the protectiveness toward his doomed daughter.

The witch who helps—but does not help—Rusalka is Ježibaba, and she was sung by Dolora Zajick, the veteran mezzo who owns one of the biggest voices in all of mezzodom. In fact, she and Stephanie Blythe can fight for it. But Zajick is far more than a big-voiced singer: She is smart, musically, and convincing, making her a leading Azucena—or Amneris, or Eboli—of our time. As Ježibaba, she sang terrifically, and she acted the same way. When she hollered eternal damnation, she meant it.

Our tenor, portraying the Prince, was a Russian, Oleg Kulko, who is little known on these shores. He started tightly, and his intonation was suspect, but he soon settled in, sounding heroic. When the Prince finally hooks up with Rusalka, she, of course, is voiceless, which is an absurd condition for Renée Fleming, in particular. This meant, however, that this opera singer—Fleming—had to become pure actress. Which she in fact did, underlining just how valuable she is as a performer.

At the end of Act I, frogs and other forest critters came out, all part of the extraordinary imagination of Otto Schenk.

Act II features a foreign princess—who wrenches the Prince from Rusalka—and this role was filled by a woman who, as far as I could tell, was the only actual Czech in the cast. A critic friend of mine remarked, "How ironic"—meaning that the sole Czech was singing the Foreign Princess! I wondered whether the soprano, Eva Urbanová, was putting on some kind of accent. I was hardly competent to judge. In any case, Urbanová was as she usually is, dark, cutting, formidable. Among her roles is Tosca, and even as she was singing the Foreign Princess, one could just hear her declare, "O Scarpia, avanti a Dio!"

In Act III, Oleg Kulko was free and easy, vocally, and Fleming, her speech restored, was deeply affecting, heartbreaking. Dvořák's Wagner-influenced music—ably conducted by Andrew Davis—entranced. One left the opera house kind of woozy and sad.

And now for the Main Event: *The Ring* is arguably the glory of the entire Met repertory. The company's music director, James Levine, loves the Schenk production, and it loves him. The conductor is the most important figure in *The Ring*—no matter who the Brünnhilde, or the Wotan, or the Siegfried—and Levine is the best Wagner conductor in the world, but we will save him for last.

It may not be possible to assemble a finer cast for *The Ring* than the one assembled by the Met for its 2004 performances. I mean, of course, that the Met probably hired as good a cast as possible in the present day (which is not necessarily a great one for Wagner singing). Alberich was Richard Paul Fink, who was compelling both physically and vocally. Wotan was James Morris, who

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is now inseparable from this role. He sang with the expected beauty and authority. When he got to the Farewell, in *Die Walküre*, his voice was shot, but this made him all the more poignant: a father delivering a wrenching goodbye to his daughter—a daughter whom he has wronged.

The find of this *Ring*, at least as far as New York was concerned, was Yvonne Naef, the Swiss mezzo-soprano making her Met debut. She was Fricka, a Norn, and Waltraute, all three. Naef has a rugged voice, but one blessed with a lyrical streak. Above all, she is an even, sure-footed, self-possessed singer. Waltraute's narration, she unfolded with a tragic majesty.

Scoring a huge hit as Mime was Gerhard Siegel, a German tenor. It was hard to imagine that one could do more with that part. So excellent was he in *Siegfried*, you might have called that opera *Mime*. Singing Erda (as well as a Norn) was Elena Zaremba, the Russian mezzo with the shockingly big voice. (In fact, she is in the Zajick and Blythe league.) And if I may, she made a palpably sexy—an earthily sexy—Erda. This was entirely appropriate.

Die Walküre meant Deborah Voigt as Sieglinde and Plácido Domingo as Siegmund. This is one of the great pairings in all of opera. Voigt was her refulgent, musically rapturous self. Rarely have we witnessed such a combination of vocal beauty and vocal power. Domingo, too, was himself, despite his senior status. His cries of "Notung!" were not as ringing as they once were, but he exploits the resources still available to him, and those resources are considerable. His aria, "Winterstürme," was shaped with beauty and intelligence.

Brünnhilde? That was Jane Eaglen, the most celebrated Brünnhilde in the world today. (She was also the most celebrated Isolde, until Debbie Voigt began singing the part, which she did last season, in Vienna.) Eaglen can be a dull singer, but she had many lively moments in *The Ring*, and those moments were gratifying. Her Immolation Scene was strangely subdued, but not a dud.

Our Siegfried was Jon Fredric West, an American tenor who has a bigger career in Europe than in his home country. He was not an ideal Siegfried, no—Lauritz Melchior is indisposed—but you're lucky to have any Siegfried at all, and West makes a competent one. A more than competent one, truthfully. He was ever game in this notoriously punishing role. The bravos he received were unquestionably earned.

Matti Salminen, the venerable Finnish bass, took care of a couple of roles in this *Ring*: that of the dragon (which is the giant Fafner in disguise) and that of Hagen. Salminen was booming and accurate, as usual, and he has a particular fix on the twisted role of Hagen. In all, he is one of the canniest performers in the business.

And now to Maestro Levine. Little can be said that has not already been said, but I will say that he is, in fact, George Szell's heir. (Levine apprenticed under the great man in Cleveland.) His Wagner is clear, disciplined, sort of Classical. It is well paced, well imagined, well felt. It pays attention to detail, and accords with the big picture.

Before Act III of *Götterdämmerung*, I said to the critic sitting next to me, "So, what should we look forward to?" He said, "Well, for one thing, Levine is the best Siegfried's Funeral Music conductor since Furtwängler." Indeed, he is possibly the best *Ring* conductor, *tout court*, since Furtwängler. The Met audience, happily—and amazingly—seems to recognize it. They screamed their heads off every time he came out for an act, and when he took his bow at the end of an opera. As I was leaving *Das Rheingold*—just the first installment of the tetralogy—a woman behind me, a complete stranger, said to me, "We just witnessed something historic, didn't we?" She had it right.

There has been talk that Levine is diminished, by a mysterious neurological illness. If he is diminished, every conductor should be so diminished. True, he has some disappointing nights. I have described these nights as "listless," "sluggish," "indifferent." I don't know whether this problem should be attributed to anything physical, but this

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season Levine has given many alive performances: in *Tristan*, in *The Marriage of Figaro*, and especially in this *Ring*. He has lived with this cycle for a long time now, and he has only increased in wisdom and command. The *Rheingold* I heard was so much better than Levine's recording (1988), it's not even funny.

I said that the final word would be devoted to Levine, but let's give it to Schenk instead. His production is called "traditional" (and that word is usually uttered with a sneer). I would say that it is not traditional, but rather right—right for these operas, which make up one of the greatest works of art in the history of man.

Concert note

Sweeney Todd, *Xerxes*,
Mourning Becomes Electra & *Ermione*
at City Opera, New York.

For the New York City Opera at Lincoln Center, the spring season in the New York State Theater typically begins with a run of a musical theater work. This year's selection was Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*, which I heard on March 11th. The piece contains some of Sondheim's more persuasive music and verse; still, I have never been especially fond of it. At heart it's a Grand Guignol horror show for the preadolescent mind, a second cousin of the "slasher" film genre. Yet it has its odd appeal and has not wanted for performances or audiences. Mark Delavan, a genuine operatic baritone, made a huge (albeit amplified) sound as Todd; Elaine Page struggled, with some success, to skirt the immense shadow of Angela Lansbury's Mrs. Lovett. All in all, the production played cleanly, conducted by the company's music director, George Manahan.

On March 30th I heard a revival of Stephen Wadsworth's acclaimed production of Handel's *Xerxes* (or *Serse*). It had much of the flavor and brio of Wadsworth's original, which opened in Santa Fe and trundled around the country, enjoying success in a number of venues, including an earlier City Opera visit. Its conceit is that it is set not in Persia but in 1730s London; indeed, much of its style derives from Thomas Lynch's excellent set of a London street and townhouse. Alas, Wadsworth's careful direction was not quite settled on the night I heard the work. The cast seemed a bit tentative in their roles, and the production suffered for it. Sarah Connolly's Xerxes—the focus of the action—needed a good deal more personality, although she sang well. Amy Burton (Romilda) and Lisa Saffer (Atalanta) projected strongly. The castrato role of Arsamene taxed David Walker's countertenor. The singers would have done well to eschew most of their reprise aria embellishments. Conductor Gary Thor Wedow is not a convinced Handelean, and the music dragged as a result.

Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* is widely dismissed as an inferior retelling of the Oresteia trilogy, but the play's recent success in London demonstrates O'Neill's sense of theater and cements his role as a major playwright. As his works tend toward a distinctly operatic flavor, it is no surprise that the composer Mark David Levy and the librettist Henry Butler alighted on *Electra* and refashioned it into an opera. Levy's *Electra* had its premiere, with a glittering cast, at the Metropolitan Opera on March 17, 1967. It was revived and, as is the case with most American operas, it disappeared. In 1998 it was revised again by Levy and presented with great success at the Chicago Lyric Opera.

The City Opera premiere is a further reworking of the score, first seen last fall in Seattle in Michael Yeargan's spare production, and it centers on Lauren Flanigan as Christina Mannon (the stand-in for Clytemnestra). It strips away the wordiness of the play but retains all its melodrama, fitting it perfectly for the opera stage. Levy's rather anonymous music-making is at least well adapted to the grisly story (though this is not true of the long Act II quartet, which begs for greater thematic underpinning).

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The work moves smartly forward, the bodies drop, and the night ends with daughter Lavinia shut up in the Mannon house seemingly for eternity.

Flanigan dominated the stage—as she usually does—in the April 1st performance, not merely with her voice, but with a judicious sense of just how far to take melodrama. Emily Pulley's Lavinia granted a centered, though subdued, presence that was at its best in the last act. Kurt Ollmann's Orin (Orestes) was properly anguished. The conductor George Manahan well appreciated the work's verismo-dramatic qualities. Even so, *Mourning Becomes Electra* is not a great American opera. It is at best an effective one, with meaty vocal opportunities; it deserves to be performed and heard from time to time. It is a pity the Met has never seen fit to revive it (despite presenting lesser operas each year)—but then, the Met has always abandoned its American children, leaving them as orphans to be rescued elsewhere.

Ermione, which I heard April 14, is one of Rossini's least-known operas. It was written for his mistress (and later wife) Isabella Colbran, and premiered in Naples in 1819. The work is based on Racine's early tragedy *Andromache*, but shifts the focus from Hector's grieving widow to the Spartan princess Ermione, sent to marry King Pirro, the son of Achilles. This feminine bundle of strong emotions (love, hate, rage, jealousy) is just the ticket for early Italian *Melodramma*: she is loved by Oreste, is in love with Pirro, who loves Andromaca, and on and on. Rossini supplies a good deal of second-drawer Rossini music, which keeps the ship floating for three acts. It is a whirlwind of separate, self-contained madnesses, borne aloft in arias and act-ending Rossinian crescendos. The climax comes in Oreste's offstage assassination of Pirro (at Ermione's urging) and her torrent of remorse.

The success of this farrago depends on the quality of the voices, and, generally speaking, the voices delivered the goods. (There was, however, a State Theater caveat that everything had been "aurally enhanced.") The Naples opera troupe in Rossini's time sported several fine tenors, so the Rossini operas from that venue (notably his *Otello*) rely on that voice. Gregory Kunde, as Pirro, negotiated his tessitura with aplomb, and Barry Banks, as Oreste, sounded fresh-voiced in a taxing role. Ursula Ferri, as Andromaca, never rose above the one-note lamentation of grief for her husband, or concern for her son (one could see why Colbran insisted on a change of heroine!). Alexandrina Pendatchanska took on the fearsome title role and acquitted herself with savage intensity throughout the range of emotions. Manahan again was in the pit, though it must be said that his pit band that evening—whether because of aural enhancement or not—sounded out of tune for most of it.

—Patrick J. Smith

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The media

Not made up but unmade

by James Bowman

Here's how Bob Woodward's new book, *Plan of Attack* (Simon & Schuster), introduces the reader to the President of the United States on page two—according to Woodward's usual practice, as if he were a character in a novel, as if we knew nothing about him:

> Large and physical with a deep stare from small brown eyes, Bush, 55, has a quick, joshing manner which at times borders on the impulsive. Focused, direct, practical but not naturally articulate, he had been elected to his first political office as governor of Texas only nine years earlier, a novice thrust into the presidency.

In fact this last statement is a mistake on both counts. Bush had been elected governor seven years earlier, not nine, and he was, though not as experienced in government as most presidents, hardly a novice, having worked as a political adviser to his father during the first Bush administration.

But let that pass. What does Woodward mean by "naturally articulate"? Are there people who are unnaturally articulate? One thinks, perhaps, of the late philosophical impresario Sir Isaiah Berlin, or the late actor, playwright, and wit Sir Peter Ustinov. But it hardly seems a valuable piece of knowledge to impart that Bush is no Isaiah Berlin or Peter Ustinov. Who had ever supposed he was? And if he had been, would he have been elected? Would he have run? Would he, as governor of Texas, ever have been in a position to run? As we look back over the roster of American presidents, few indeed are those, at least after the Founding Fathers' generation, who *are* unnaturally articulate, yet Bush's natural inarticulateness, or perhaps *unnatural* inarticulateness, is regarded as being worthy of note to an audience which has been paying unusual attention to his public utterances for the past four years. Who could possibly be interested in such an observation? Here, in a nutshell, is the difference between knowledge and Woodwardian information.

And *Plan of Attack*, though it is as full of information as the rest of Woodward's books, makes virtually no contribution to our knowledge either of President Bush and his administration or of the war in Iraq. Part of the problem is Woodward's own inarticulateness, which really does seem unnatural in a man who has covered so many acres of newsprint in his life. The title of his book made me think briefly that for once he had been reading something other than his voluminous notes. In particular, it immediately suggested Siegfried Sassoon's poem of the First World War, "The General."

> "Good morning, good-morning!" the General
> said
> When we met him last week on our way to
> the line.
> Now the soldiers he smiled at are most
> of 'em dead,

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> And we're cursing his staff for incompetent
> swine.
> "He's a cheery old card," grunted Harry to Jack
> As they slogged up to Arras with rifle and pack.
> . . . .
> But he did for them both by his plan of attack.

Perhaps the cheery old Card was Andrew Card, President Bush's chief of staff? But look in the index and you find—let's see: Saddam International Airport, Salih, Ali Abdullah, Sargat, sarin gas, satellite imagery and intercept, satellite phones, Saudi Arabia—nope, no Sassoon. Nor anything else not at least as closely involved as the above with the planning for and execution of the invasion of Iraq in March of 2003. Woodward may be focused like a laser on that subject, but he has no point of perspective on it, no wider culture that would help him in converting information into knowledge.

Nor is there any stylistic grace. Woodward has taken to heart, if ever man did, Queen Gertrude's injunction to Polonius: "More matter with less art." Of course art, either in the form of wit or irony or Sassoonian anger and indignation, has never been quite in Woodward's line, any more than poetry has. No such old-fashioned, literary concerns for him! He sees himself as a sort of journalistic engineer who aims to construct a massive edifice of truth out of the "evidence" he has gleaned from fantastic and indefatigable industry, so that all further history, artful or otherwise, must fall silent before it. But the world's most famous and hard-working reporter is a lazy writer. His intention is to leave nothing to art—or to chance, intuition, or insight—so reducing his craft to a science. And so, of course, everything is wrong.

Actually, this is an artful overstatement. Or rather an artful paradox, since everything is both right *and* wrong. It is right in detail—at least it is if we extend to him the courtesy of accepting an awful lot of pseudo-quotations as being close enough for government work—but wrong in conception. In fact there is no conception in the sense of a broader picture emerging out of the accumulated details, like a mosaic. That is why both the Bush and Kerry camps are recommending the book. You can see anything you want in it, though most people will only find their own prejudices confirmed. Which, of course, is the point if you're trying to write a bestseller.

My own industry as a reader was considerably taxed by the effort to get beyond page three of the book, where I found the following passage about the secrecy with which President Bush and his defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, began developing, in November 2001, plans for an invasion of Iraq:

> Two years later in interviews, Bush said he did not want others in on the secret because a leak would trigger "enormous international angst and domestic speculation. I knew what would happen if people thought we were developing a potential war plan for Iraq."
>
> The Bush-Rumsfeld-Franks work remained secret for months and when partial disclosures made their way into the media the next year, the president, Rumsfeld and others in the administration, attempting to defuse any sense of immediacy, spoke of contingency planning and insisted that war plans were not on the president's desk.
>
> Knowledge of this work would have ignited a firestorm, the president knew. "It was such a high-stakes moment and when people had this sense of war followed on the heels of the Afghan decision," Bush's order for a military operation into Afghanistan in response to 9/11, "it would look like that I was anxious to go to war. And I'm not anxious to go to war." He insisted, "War is my absolute last option."
>
> At the same time, Bush said, he realized that the simple act of setting Rumsfeld in motion on Iraq war plans might be the first step in taking the nation to a war with Saddam Hussein. "Absolutely," Bush recalled. What he perhaps had not realized was that war plans and the process of war planning become policy by their own momentum, especially with the intimate involvement of both the secretary of defense and the president.

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You don't have to be a high stylist or an arty type to be shocked by the poor quality of the writing here, which is full of mixed and broken metaphors, like the "leak" that would "trigger," as Bush supposed, "enormous angst" or the administration's attempt to "defuse" a "sense of immediacy" when what Woodward means is that it tried to convey the impression that there was no sense of immediacy. The same kind of thing is going on in the statement that "Knowledge of this work would have ignited a firestorm." This is typical journalistic hype so worn out by now that Woodward doesn't even bother to complete the metaphor, which most readers will understand to imply "a firestorm of protest." Yet few of these readers are likely to inquire any further into the metaphor's significance, to put a *tenor* to this *vehicle*, to use lit-crit terminology, by wondering where the firestorm is or what it consists of or how it could be ignited by the mere knowledge that Bush was planning for war.

The imagery is so tired that lazy readers will simply assume that they know what the lazy writer means. In fact he means—to change the figure—that the journalistic pack, of which Woodward himself is the lead dog, would bay themselves hoarse at this "knowledge" on the tacit understanding that it amounted to scandal, or at least that it could pass for scandal among the credulous members of what we laughably call the intelligentsia, even though most people would regard it as a matter of indifference. You can put that down as the definition of "firestorm" in your dictionary of journalese.

But the word "knowledge" is also misused here. Like virtually everything else in Woodward's book, the news that the president and his cabinet started working on a war plan for Iraq in November 2001 is information, not knowledge. It is an unnecessary increment to our knowledge that he did, in fact, go to war in Iraq in 2003 and must, therefore, have begun planning for the war at some earlier date. By pinning down this date as November 2001, Woodward adds nothing to our understanding either of Bush or of the war, but he is able to hint that there is about the fact that he was planning for war while ostensibly negotiating to avoid it something, even if nothing more than a *soupçon*, of scandal. Maybe it's not enough to ignite one of his famous firestorms at this distance of time from the event, but those already inclined to accuse the President of corruption and skullduggery will know what to do with it. Woodward himself can only manage another crashing banality: "The story of Bush's decisions leading up to the Iraq War is a chronicle of continual dilemmas, since the president was pursuing two simultaneous policies. . . . He was planning for war, and he was conducting diplomacy aiming to avoid war. At times, the war planning aided the diplomacy; at many other points it contradicted it."

When in human history, I wonder, has there ever been a war that did not involve diplomacy at some level, and so precisely the "two simultaneous policies" that Woodward mentions here? Once again, he gives the illusion of knowledge in the course of stating the obvious. Often he then goes on to produce a pseudo-profundity, designed to display his own superior wisdom, as in the concluding speculation of the passage above: "What he perhaps had not realized was that war plans and the process of war planning become policy by their own momentum, especially with the intimate involvement of both the secretary of defense and the president."

That "perhaps" is an uncharacteristic bit of artistry designed to suggest a becoming modesty but in fact to provide a cover for sheer guesswork—guesswork not only as to whether or not Bush was unaware that planning could become policy by its own momentum and even more guesswork as to whether or not it did so in this case. If you read the sentence carefully, the indicative "become" seems shocking in its arrogance. Where is his authority for the contention that plans and planning *become* policy? We may stipulate that the thing is possible,

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though I myself have a few doubts, but the fact that there was planning for war and then there was war tells us nothing about the matter one way or the other.

But then all questions of "momentum" seem almost to settle themselves in a book like this one where the weight of information is always there to lend its inertia to the cause. It is only one of the ways for information of the kind Woodward specializes in to be misleading. Consider his quotation from the President himself, who was prevailed upon to provide the great journalist "access" of a kind no other could expect. Bush says: "It would look like that I was anxious to go to war. And I'm not anxious to go to war." Indeed, he emphasizes: "War is my absolute last option." It is, to be sure, an undeniable bit of information that Bush said this, but the fact is only a contribution to pseudo-knowledge. For what else could he have said? What else is it even imaginable that he would have said? This doesn't mean that it is true or that it isn't true but only that its truth or lack of it is irrelevant and unknowable. All we can really know about the matter is the tiny piece of utterly useless and unsurprising information that the President thought it worth saying in reply to a question, any question, from Bob Woodward, ace journalist and sniffer-out of presidential scandal, that he was reluctant to go to war.

Such information is not only useless in itself, but its accumulation, like the intellectual equivalent of arterial plaque, restricts the flow of real knowledge. Even good and useful information must be treated with care, since it is like the bad and useless kind in producing the illusion of knowledge. Thus even the book's most highly publicized bit of information, namely that the CIA director, George Tenet, told President Bush before the invasion of Iraq that the existence of Weapons of Mass Destruction there was a "slam dunk," hardly amounts to a revelation. Even if you suppose that Bush would have gone to war in any case, he clearly would not have made so much of the WMD as a reason for doing so unless he had had some such assurance from his intelligence people—unless, of course, you belong to the paranoid anti-Bush crowd who assume that he knew all along that the WMD claim was a lie. And then the question becomes: Why would he have told so publicly and so emphatically a lie so likely—we may say so certain—to be found out?

In the same way, as Gregg Easterbrook pointed out,

> It was treated as a headline . . . that Woodward asserts that George W. Bush privately told Condoleezza Rice, "We're going to have to go to war." Everyone in the world has known for more than a year that Bush must have said things like this; who cares what the exact choice of words were? How can something that six billion people have known for a year be treated as a scoop?

There is, I think, actually an answer to that question. It is that journalism, as it is practiced today, regards as a scoop any slightest scrap of information which with the help of sufficient ingenuity may possibly be regarded as confirmatory of the journalistic consensus. Information is meaningless without context, and so the media are forced to provide a rough-and-ready context of their own, a sort of default set of categories into which the ever growing piles of information can be shoveled, at least until there is time—if there ever *is* time—to make more sense of it.

Woodward, not gifted in this particular way himself, is mostly content to use the categories already furnished to him by the journalistic consensus. "Bush is a religious nut," says the consensus with oracular certainty; "Cheney was hell-bent on invading Iraq." And Woodward, slavering like a bloodhound on the scent, is turned off the leash to go find the information that will prove it.

You wouldn't have had to read beyond page three to know that he had proved it too, at least to the satisfaction of those who already knew it. It was in all the papers. But

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here is another way in which reading Woodward's book is a waste of time as well as a painful experience to anyone with an ear for English prose. For the publicity needed to sell the book in quantities sufficient to pay for all those hours spent in interviews and other research depends on the book's findings turning out to be pretty much in accord with the media consensus. The master of the art of obtaining interviews with others knows very well what he needs to do to be interviewed himself. Bush a religious nut! Cheney hell-bent on war! said all the headlines, in effect. But like the "scoop" that Bush told Condoleezza Rice that "We're going to have to go to war," they were headline news that people already knew. Or thought they knew. What, after all, would have been the coverage of his book if Woodward had found that Bush actually liked nothing better than curling up with a volume of Schopenhauer of an evening, or that Cheney was taking instruction in Zen Buddhism?

Knowledge, as we know, is resistant to information that does not confirm what is already known. Reviewers of *Plan of Attack* found in it no challenge to what they knew about Bush before they read it, only tons of more or less trivial information that they could pick and choose among to reinforce their prejudices. Thus we find that Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times* finds in the book that the Bush White House is "committed to the 'vision thing' in a big way (promoting risky, sweeping ideas like exporting democracy and pre-emptive war) and the avoidance of any perception of wimpiness, a White House in many ways determined to avoid accusations once hurled at the president's father"—and there's the department of political psychobabble heard from. No wonder Miss Kakutani found it Woodward's "most powerful and persuasive book in years."

The question of what is good and bad or useful and useless information is bound to depend, for a high-profile information supplier like Bob Woodward, on what will fit his readers' prejudices. In other words, a celebrity journalist is, to the extent that he is a celebrity, bound to hunt only the truffles of information that suit the delicacy of his readers' palates. Surprises are not only bad, they are virtually impossible. If any genuinely surprising information had been uncovered, anything that produced a real shock to the media consensus—as opposed to the affected shock in which they specialize—it would have had to be re-interred beneath a mound of banality and pointless information. Not only would it have endangered the subsequent publicity campaign for the book by providing television interviewers with material they would have had to work with and wouldn't have known how to work with, but it would also have angered the already angry partisans on both sides of our polarized intellectual and political world.

Their minds are not so much made up as they are unmade by a passionate desire not to be changed. Mr. Woodward, by declining any effort of thought himself, has cleverly given both sides exactly what they want.

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Verse chronicle

Stouthearted men

by William Logan

George Oppen was one of the minor literary figures of the 1930s.[1] Friend of Pound, employer of Zukofsky, collaborator with Williams and Reznikoff, an animating spirit of the Objectivist movement, he was a young man with ideals and a little money, who with more money, or fewer ideals, might have become as useful as James Laughlin. In 1935, Oppen joined the Communist Party, while concealing his bourgeois past as a poet (this might have told him something about the party, if Stalin's purges did not). For the next twenty years or more, Oppen swore off poetry; when not training for party leadership, he organized the poor, fomented strikes, and protested against monopolies (though the aim of any union is to exploit a monopoly of labor). During World War II, he was wounded while serving in an anti-tank unit in Europe. After the war he built furniture, attended art school in Mexico on the GI Bill, and added to his swollen FBI file.

In the late Fifties, Oppen began writing again, in the starved, cruelly compressed style abandoned decades before. This resurrection of a poet so long out of touch, and even out of date, proved irresistible to young writers influenced by William Carlos Williams. The minor figure of the Thirties became a minor figure of the Sixties. Before the decade was over, he had won the Pulitzer Prize.

Oppen's spareness was like that of a Zen master with a migraine:

> Never to forget her naked eyes
>
> Beautiful and brave
> Her naked eyes
>
> Turn inward
>
> Feminine light
>
> The unimagined
> Feminine light
>
> Feminine ardor

Paring away his poems until they were nearly skeletons, he was often left with just a few ribs and some knucklebones. His critics, who have frequently been his disciples, have made high claims for Oppen's minimalism, which he pursued more aggressively than Williams, though it could seem pinched and hectoring, a telegram from Moscow instructing you that everything you thought yesterday is wrong. In Pound or Williams, you see details refined until they glow with the special light of Imagism; but in Oppen you seem to get farther, down to the sludge at the bottom of the glass.

Oppen's poems are plain as a brown paper bag, slightly depressing, maudlin about people in a Thirties way (which was also a Sixties way), often tone-deaf to the virtues of language (that *is* his virtue, say his

1 *Selected Poems*, by George Oppen, edited by Robert Creeley; New Directions, 206 pages, $14.95 (paper).

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critics): "We want to say// 'Common sense'/ And cannot. We stand on// That denial/ Of death that paved the cities,/ Paved the cities// Generation/ For generation." The world of Oppen's poems has removed all that might qualify or enrich it, that might make it more various than some shopworn Platonic form. Michelangelo chiseled away the marble until he reached the figure—but what made him a genius was knowing when he'd *reached* the figure. In other words, he knew when to stop.

Oppen's ambition often seems in excess of the words he left behind. At best his sketchy, expressionist method pays homage to the shudders and hesitations of thought; but this is fiendishly difficult to do well—otherwise H.D. and Edith Sitwell would be geniuses (the attempt to compare Oppen to Paul Celan is ludicrous). Oppen lived for pretentious observation and barnyard wisdom—"How much of the earth's/ Crust has lived/ The seed's violence!" His reviewers have used phrases like "stunning, elliptical," "the twentieth century's most dazzling maker of lines," "verse that sparkles like broken glass." Such opinions seem quaint as fossils.

Oppen offered an alternative to bland academic verse, as well as to the garrulous and self-absorbed Beats (the disorganized essay included here, the only one the poet ever wrote, comments drily on the difference); but his minimalism couldn't conceal how desolately inward his poetry became, like clippings from a freshman philosophy textbook or the empty thoughts of mannequins. You can't wholly dislike a poet whose main villains are Romans and shoppers; though, when a poet writing of poetry invokes Gethsemane, you wonder if his mind doesn't turn to betrayal a little too easily. How much more telling about the lives of the poor are the photographs of Helen Levitt or Walker Evans. You wonder what Oppen might have written instead about that anti-tank company.

This poet stopped writing for reasons as noble and laughable as Laura Riding's. Once a man has stopped, to show class solidarity or his despair at the tragedy that is the world, how does he start again without seeming a hypocrite? Yet Oppen ground on at his minor craft until the dry rot set in, a man at odds with his art, which ought to have benefited the art more than it did (art often thrives on contraries or arrested impulse). His poems wanted to be a poem, which wanted to be a line, which wanted to be a word, which at last wanted to be just a single letter, perhaps "I" or "O!"

Americans are suckers for self-pity—they order their mawkishness by the yard. We're still at heart a Puritan country; since we can't throw sinners in the stocks any more (unless it's done on prime time), we'll settle for the humiliating public apology followed by the spectacular relapse. Franz Wright's poems may be rancid and repetitive, but he's perfected a confessional tone angry and apologetic at once. *Walking to Martha's Vineyard*, which recently won the Pulitzer Prize, is the latest installment of this fragile, self-obsessed author's stony path to grace.[2]

Most of Wright's poems are nasty, brutish, and short—it's an old joke, but Wright really *is* Hobbesian man, consoling himself with second-hand religious formulae and the salve of salvation:

> Oh build a special city
> for everyone who wishes
>
> to die, where
> they might help one another out
>
> and never feel ashamed
> maybe make a friend,
>
> etc.

Maybe make a friend! (This is how Mr. Rogers would talk, if he were an ex-junkie.) Yet for all the tabloid-style anguish, Wright's minimalism is deft and effective, with the emotional pressure of Louise

2 *Walking to Martha's Vineyard*, by Franz Wright; Alfred A. Knopf, 81 pages, $23.00.

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Glück. These damaged and tormented poets (if they were to collaborate on *Passive-Aggression for Dummies*, I'd hardly be surprised) have refined the poetic act to short prosaic sentences, brimful with resentment, seething with a rage for which words are inadequate. Behind every poem stands an entourage of nurses, shrinks, and self-help counselors.

Like few other poets in our pulse-taking age, Wright has solved the problem of how to reclaim the confessions of Lowell and Plath without falling victim to the *tableaux vivants* of a Sharon Olds (whose poems look, next to Wright's austerity, like the wildest *fin de siècle* dandyism). The pain is so raw, it's like watching documentary footage; but, if you make a competition of suffering by having nails driven through your wrists, one day someone will tear out his own tongue, pluck out his eyeballs, and call it art. Wright has a gift for sneered gratitude, for invoking God with the wheedling piety of a three-time loser before a parole board:

> Thank You for letting me live for a little as
> one of the
> sane; thank You for letting me know what
> this is
> like. Thank You for letting me look at your
> frightening
> blue sky without fear, and your terrible world
> without
> terror, and your loveless psychotic and
> hopelessly
> lost
> with this love

Wright clings to his new-found religion the way men cling to the raft in Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa*. He's so self-abasing, he reminds us that con artists are usually conning themselves along with everyone else. I see why some poets like his work—he's a sad-sack punk, a fifty-year-old who pisses and moans like a depressive teenager. Hell, you want to adopt him.

When Wright offers the crude, unprocessed sewage of suffering, it's nasty stuff. Yet this poet is surprisingly vague about the specifics of his torment (most of his poems are shouts and curses in the dark). He was cruelly affected by the divorce of his parents, though perhaps after forty years there should be a statute of limitations. His father was the poet James Wright, which seems to make the son twice damned—his poems whisper about an abandoned son of his own and hint repeatedly at attempted suicide. Just when I decide to dislike him for his truculent theatrics, his prima-donna moroseness (when have we had a poet more devoted to Our Lady of the Eternal Victim?), he'll write something so ruefully funny it's hard not to forgive him: "Now she is going to put on some/ nice cut-your-wrists music," or "What an evil potato goes through/ we can never know, but/ I'm beginning to resemble one." (And it's true—he *does* resemble one.) We need a modern Beddoes, and I wish Wright would apply for the job.

A few such lines are not enough, however, and soon he's back to the drudgery of self-loathing. Self-loathing is a meager thing for a poet to offer as his only medium, even if here and there he's able to turn his brutishness to account. "The Only Animal," the most accomplished poem in the book, collapses into the same kitschy sanctimoniousness that puts nodding Jesus dolls on car dashboards. Wright's religious angst, just the right stuff for our shallow, shopping-mall culture, makes his poems the Hallmark cards of the damned.

You meet a lot of Tony Hoagland's friends in Tony Hoagland's poems.[3] *What Narcissism Means to Me* names more names than you can shake a stick at—there's Alex and Greg and Boz and Rus, Susan and Margaret, Kath and Peter and Mary, Neal and Sylvia and Ann and Ethan, Carla and Jerry and Peter, and these just in the first half-dozen poems (it would be easier if they were all named George, like George Foreman's sons). Frank O'Hara used to give his

3 *What Narcissism Means to Me*, by Tony Hoagland; Graywolf Press, 82 pages, $14.00 (paper).

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friends walk-on roles, and many a young poet now stuffs his acknowledgments with what seems to be his entire address book. Hoagland's friends merely slouch around the house making smart remarks, which their Boswell dutifully records.

> Alex said, *I wish they made a shooting gallery*
> *using people like that.*
>
> Greg said, *That woman has a Ph.D. in Face.*
> Then we saw a preview for a movie
>
> about a movie star who is
> having a movie made about her,
> and Boz said, *This country is getting stupider*
> *each year.*
>
> Then Greg said that things were better in the
> sixties
> and Rus said that Harold Bloom said
> that Nietzsche said Nostalgia
> is the blank check issued to a weak mind,
> and Greg said . . .

But enough! This is all very agreeable, as far as it goes, and makes the implicit criticism that Americans have become couch potatoes who get their Nietzsche second- or third-hand. Yet when poem succeeds poem of these nattering chums, you realize how little you care about them—if the poet stopped hanging out with them, he might have something more interesting to write about. They come and go with all the anonymity of Eliot's women talking of Michelangelo—except, four generations later, they're no longer talking of Michelangelo.

It's no secret that America is overrun with "RadioShacks and Burger Kings, and MTV episodes," that we have supersized our egos with our appetites—Hoagland isn't improving here on the wit and wisdom of Thorstein Veblen. What's peculiar is that the poet has chosen, not to analyze the condition, but to embody it; and his poems are full of droll banalities—they reduce everything to the lowest common denominator and smirk about it. If Dante's *Inferno* were populated by Hoagland's buddies, they'd look around and not be able to think of a single complaint.

O'Hara wrote his I-do-this, I-do-that poems half a century ago. These days they seem, most of them, awfully trivial; but Hoagland aspires to go him one better, or worse. The poems here are cozy but forgettable, no harder to swallow than a dose of aspirin. If Hoagland ever feels any unease—and he does, sometimes, for a minute or two—it's best to assuage it with a wisecrack and drift back to that waking dream we call television (he spends a lot of time watching television and wants the privilege of whining about it).

> How did I come to believe in a government
> called Tony Hoagland?
> with an economy based on flattery and
> self-protection?
> and a sewage system of selective forgetting?
> and an extensive history of broken promises?
>
> What did I get in exchange for my little
> bargain? What did I lose?
> Where are my natural resources, my principal
> imports,
> and why is my landscape so full of stony
> ridges and granite outcroppings?

These lines are deceptively good-natured, and they're as deep as he gets. There's nothing terrible about such poetry—Hoagland has a ready-to-wear style, the kind you can throw into the washer when it's dirty and take out half an hour later, wrinkle free. Such a style can take on any subject, yet never put two words together in a meaningful way. If he can reduce the awful heritage of slavery to a TV tennis match, world peace should be a snap.

Perhaps it's enough to write such mild, self-conscious, smugly unambitious poems. Hoagland's subject is the late, declining American empire; and he intends to watch the fires from the comfort of his sofa. You don't ever get the feeling he reads, or is affected by anything he can't shut off with a remote control—he's made so uncomfortable by AIDS he calls it "one of those dis-

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eases known by its initials." Despite the chattering presence of myriads of Hoagland's friends, I've rarely read a book that seemed lonelier. Even Narcissus wasn't that lonely—he had himself for company.

The Clerk's Tale was written by the assistant manager of a Brooks Brothers store in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, a world as distant from poetry as Wallace Stevens's office in the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company.[4] How unlikely (and unlike anyone else's), however, Stevens' poems were. Spencer Reece's confident, stagy, slightly occluded first book proves that poetry not written by academics can be just as academic as any assistant professor's.

It cheered me up to think the title poem might have a little Chaucer in it, but "The Clerk's Tale" is rather the *cri de coeur* of a man who works in a clothing shop, a man perhaps a little like the author. Though verging on self-pity, it portrays the lives endured blankly on the other side of the counter, reminding us how much the customer must mask out just to buy a shirt. (That, indeed, was the whole point of keeping servants faceless presences—when you start to sympathize with them, someone somewhere starts sewing mob caps.)

Reece's mature if slightly overheated voice shows how much can be gained by waiting a few years to publish a first book. He's in his early forties, about the age when Frost and Stevens published theirs. I'm not drawn to all parts of Reece's talent—he has a taste for short declarative sentences, sometimes half a dozen in a row, that sound like tabloid reportage. Elsewhere the touches of artistry, and even aestheticism, offer transcendence on the cheap:

> when the maple sweats and saps at the
> corners of his mouth
> and when the oak shakes his leaves like a
> thousand horseshoes
> is the time my heart bangs with barn-joy
> and I breathe in the subtle
> approbation of death coming as I recognize
> the Byzantine look
>
> of the trees emptying themselves of themselves.

Barn-joy, eh? The poet's exuberance seems heartfelt but somewhat demented, and he can't help himself from busting out into lines like "encircled by a halo of rocks, trees, crops, rivers, clouds—/ by every blessed thing conspiring together to save my life" or "I've been waiting for the tulip bulbs, those necessary ambulances,/ to come and sound the emergencies of the world. Nothing so far." There's only so much a reader can take before wanting to crawl under a blanket to shut out the neon signs.

Reece includes two sequences of ghazals that aren't ghazals at all (they're scraps from John Ashbery's wastebasket: "Tra la la la. Lovers fling their arms open like medicine cabinets,/ offering their baptized scalps to fun new people like thesauruses"). Some young poets can make new selves from their influences, but Reece gets into his influences' skin the way he might throw on a Halloween costume. The book ends with an overlong sequence of unpunctuated poems that sound more like late Merwin than Merwin.

It's easy to catalogue the problems in these poems—their preciousness and exaggeration of feeling; their news-at-eleven opportunism; their taste for freakish similes, as if W. H. Auden's executors were having a fire sale (a severed tongue "in her hand like a ticket," "fish disappear like keys," "hydrangeas shift in their pitcher like wigs"). Indeed, though a few poems possess a beautiful modesty, many are afflicted with a boorish loudness, as if they had caught Dylan Thomas disease—Reece's *diminuendi* might be other poets *crescendi*.

Yet if Reece makes some mistakes young poets make, and some winningly his own, there are enough moments of raw talent and character to make those promises young poets are known for.

4 *The Clerk's Tale*, by Spencer Reece; Houghton Mifflin, 66 pages, $12.00 (paper).

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There was a yacht club meeting every summer
with a cannon that went off—*baboom!*
Women arrived in their thin Talbots belts,
carrying wicker purses shaped like paint cans
with whalebone carvings fastened on top,
resembling the hardened excrement seagulls
drop.

Occasionally the purses would open,
albeit reluctantly, like safe-deposit boxes.
Men wore cranberry trousers and Brooks
Brothers blue blazers.

There's product placement for you! Many of the descriptions are rendered with similar lightness, only occasionally coming too close to the tears the poet always seems on the verge of weeping. In his best poems his modesty becomes suffering and his discontinuity, rage. His portraits are reminiscent of those by the elderly Rembrandt, pushing paint this way and that, almost from pure joy, until the painting has been thumbed into life.

Buffalo Yoga is the silliest title in a body of work that gives it close competition in *Zone Journals* and *A Short History of the Shadow*.[5] Charles Wright, who turns seventy next year, has for a long while been among our best poets. My complaint has been that lately he hasn't written any *poems*, just bundles of lines, loose as kindling, offered to the reader with a crooked country grin, as if to say, "Why, you can't hardly find so nice a bunch of kindling in fifty mile." And you couldn't, if what you were after was kindling.

Wright is a master of the natural image—he exemplifies what Pound wanted when he said the "natural object is always the *adequate* symbol."

The sun has set behind the Blue Ridge,
And evening with its blotting paper
lifts off the light.

Indeed, if they didn't sometimes have the air of a later day, Wright's images would seem pilfered from Pound's notebooks. The problem in Wright's work has been that he gets beyond such gorgeous images only to indulge in garden metaphysics. Wright has read the Chinese poets Pound was so influenced by—the new poems often resemble ancient Chinese scrolls, otherworldly but static. At times he's like some bearded sage crossed with Mammy Yokum, puffing on a corncob pipe:

God's ghost taps once on the world's window,
then taps again
And drags his chains through the evergreens.
Weather is where he came from, and to
weather returns,
His backside black on the southern sky,
Mumbling and muttering, distance like
doomsday loose in his hands.

The silliness here doesn't quite outweigh the pleasure, the calculation and risk; when Wright pulls off such pretentious humbuggery, you're glad he took his chances. Yet the poems are too often saddled with maundering esoterics, Sunday school phrases like the "stained glare of angel wings," and moments when the poet waxes philosophic about his work, having perhaps read more of late, apologetic Pound than is good for a man: "I tried to give form to the formless,/ and speech to the unspeakable./ To the light that shines without shadow, I gave myself." Pound earned the right to say similar things at the end of his life; here there's just the sound of a man patting his own back.

Wright has been writing fragments for too long; the new poems that make the most impression hold their form in narrative or reminiscence, haunted by memory, by old dreams and desires. The poems are haggard and loose-hipped, sometimes winning in their refusal to force a story into shape, yet often collapsing into a banal gloss on memory and narrative—they're so affectless and cool, it's hard not to grow irritated when they pass off as profound the most appalling cornbread platitudes: "Imagination is merely the door./ All we can do is knock hard/ And hope that something

5 *Buffalo Yoga*, by Charles Wright; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 79 pages, $20.

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will open it." The poet's lyric fragments are merely an admission that telling a tale is beyond him.

By his fifties or sixties a poet has taken out a certain number of patents (perhaps all he is likely to); and these he defends to the death, whether or not they're worth it. The best poets may take out hundreds, scattering them across the public domain, secure that no one will be able to use them quite as well. Like most older poets, Wright has sunk into a mire of self-imitation, and sometimes self-flattery. Yet here and there, broadcast through this self-indulgent book, are stanzas of astonishing freshness and needle-eyed vision:

> Shadows are clumsy and crude, their eggs few,
> And dragonflies, like lumescent [*sic*] Ohio Blue
> Tip matchsticks,
> Puzzle the part-opened iris stalks,
> hovering and stiff.
> New flies frenetic against the glass,
> Woodpeckers at their clocks,
> the horses ablaze in the grained light.

You'd have to go a long way to find a poet who does these things so well (though where was the copy editor when Wright tried to strike the match of *lumescent*?). It's like finding a man who makes brilliant origami out of *Playboy* centerfolds—you love them, but you wonder if it's an art worth pursuing.

When Philip Larkin died in 1985, he was the most beloved poet in Britain; only the year before, he had turned down the chance to become poet laureate. Anthony Thwaite, his old friend, edited the *Collected Poems* (1988; U.S., 1989) by placing Larkin's poems in chronological order and infiltrating scores of uncollected poems among the published verse. This might have been a sensible procedure for another poet; but the earlier volume, which this edition replaces,[6] concealed the strengths and diluted the intensity of the most important British poet between Auden and Geoffrey Hill.

Larkin's reputation has been in free fall since the publication of Thwaite's *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin* (1992) and Andrew Motion's literary biography *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (1993), which revealed that behind the poems' miserable loner lay a real loner, one nasty and misogynist and racist to boot. Why were people surprised? Yet they *were* surprised. Many readers apparently thought that Larkin's morose self-hatred concealed something lovable, that a man so wise about inadequacy and foible must have been exaggerating the ugly part of his personality. Few thought he might have toned down his opinions out of embarrassment or shame, that instead of a shy librarian he might be an alcoholic who kept porn magazines in his office closet.

Larkin was "one of those old-type *natural* fouled-up guys." The world had changed around him, and what he disliked was that it had changed. The repulsive opinions appear in his letters, not the poems; but there are worse things than concealing private intolerance behind public respectability (think how despicable the reverse is). Whether he's referring to Morocco as "coonland," or calling the government "decimal-loving, nigger-mad, army-cutting," or saying, "The Slade is a cunty place, full of 17-year-old cunts," we have no idea what Larkin felt when he wrote such things. He may have been indulging in matey blokishness (the remarks are made mostly to old schoolmates), proving himself immune to new public manners, or merely revealing the lethal prejudices he'd learned to keep private. It might have been a mixture of these things; but it is crude to assume he was moved only by hatred, just as it would be exculpatory to believe his impulses were without trace of hatred.

In a tell-all age all must be told, but it's crucial to remember how recently such language was common. If we're going to call Eliot an anti-Semite and Larkin a racist, we ought to start drawing up an indictment of

6 *Collected Poems*, by Philip Larkin, edited by Anthony Thwaite; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 218 pages, $14.00 (paper).

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Sylvia Plath, who noted in her journals a girl's "long Jewy nose"; or Marianne Moore, who mentioned in a letter that a "coon took me up in the elevator"; or William Carlos Williams, whose letters are peppered with references to wops, niggers, and Jews. Until very recently such remarks were so prevalent in Britain and America, we do ourselves no credit by turning into scapegoats the writers who merely succumbed to the bigotry of the age.

We are no better if we condemn such opinions without seeing where Larkin rose above them, sometimes merely by exposing the insecurity and self-loathing at their heart. His poems may be the record of how a man converts his basest feelings to something more humane; and we read him, not because he is less base, but because the flaws reveal his pathos. In all their quiet generosities, their humility despite themselves, the poem make clear they were not simply a way of concealing his prejudices for the public taste.

Indeed, why should we assume that letters are any more trustworthy than poems? If I lie about myself in my poems, trying to appear wiser or more charitable, in my letters I may make myself seem dumber and more intolerant. People who don't want to be known in public don't necessarily drop their trousers in private. The current taste for *meae culpae* is no more laudable than the self-criticism communist governments used to demand of prisoners, before standing them against a wall. Will later generations value so highly the poets who quoted only the approved opinions of our day, or preached only the pieties the age demanded?

Anthony Thwaite, no doubt stung by the protests raised by critics, has now done more or less what he ought to have done originally, arranged the poems in the order Larkin wished (few poets constructed their books as carefully), with appendices to collect the strays. The new introduction is, alas, defensive and unapologetic. Having omitted any poem the poet failed to publish, Thwaite has thrown some of the babies out with the bath water. Almost a hundred minor poems no longer appear here—though few will be missed, two or three (including "An April Sunday . . . ," "The Dance," and "Love Again," all of which Thwaite laments not including) deserve a place in Larkin's collected works.

Larkin ought to be considered (though the idea would have given him the heebie-jeebies) a confessional poet *avant la lettre,* revealing himself as brutally in his way as Lowell and Plath in theirs. He's our great poet of mixed feelings, of disappointment and self-doubt (and as good as Frost—who was also something of a monster in private—on the complexities of human nature). Larkin's poems catch the tension between impulse and reserve (reserve always winning out), and proclaim, not in the least ironically, the virtues of ordinariness—"May you be ordinary," he wrote to a new baby.

Though his early poems were influenced by Yeats and Auden, the model for Larkin must be Housman. They share the same taste for moral observation, the wry and somewhat sour demeanor, the preference for the memorable phrase over the clever one, though in other ways they could not be more different—Housman looked for classical virtue and often gave way to sentiment, while Larkin pursued only his own unsentimental muddles amid the bric-à-brac of English life. His most heartbreaking poems fear that life is going on somewhere else—he is a wonderful poet of nothings ("Nothing," as he said, "like something, happens anywhere").

The list of Larkin's best poems must include "I Remember, I Remember," "Mr Bleaney," "The Whitsun Weddings," "MCMXIV," "Talking in Bed" (has there ever been a better poem about the bedroom?), "Dockery and Son," "An Arundel Tomb," "The Trees," "Going, Going," "Homage to a Government," "This Be the Verse," "Sad Steps," the great swansong "Aubade," and dozens scarcely less fine. In the past century, no British poet except Housman and Auden has written verse as memorable, or better suited to public memory. The virtues of Larkin's ordinariness have never been more necessary.

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Books

Constant's middle path

by Daniel J. Mahoney

Liberty Fund has published an elegant, faithfully translated edition of the first (1810) and longest version of Constant's *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Modern Governments* (the shorter 1815 edition is available in English in the edition of Constant's *Political Writings* published by Cambridge University Press).[1] The 1810 version is considerably more discursive than the pithy and carefully crafted work of the same name published in 1815. This makes reading it something of an effort. But the 1815 version has limitations. It was to some extent a *livre de circonstance*. By it, Constant aimed, at least in part, to justify the "Benjamine," the framework for constitutional monarchy that he penned at Napoleon's request during the so-called "Hundred Days" between the Emperor's escape from Elba and his final defeat at Waterloo (Constant's brief reconciliation with Napoleon would be a continuing source of embarrassment for this ardent opponent of despotism). The earlier, unexpurgated text, even if it lacks the finished quality of some of his later masterpieces, thus allows us to confront Constant's political theory unalloyed. But Constant is a pleasure to read in any form. He is a stylist of the first order. His consistently wise observations about politics and human nature are presented in an epigrammatic fashion that it is impossible to imitate and that one cannot help but admire.

Constant's work is a relatively recent addition to the canon of political theory, having been largely forgotten during the long period of radical republican and Marxist ascendancy in French intellectual life. The late French political theorist Bertrand de Jouvenel once remarked that the historical experience of Jacobin and Napoleonic despotism "turned the entire world of [French] letters to 'constitutionalism.'" Constant was the most eloquent and thoughtful of these "constitutionalists." His writings provide a unique resource for the effort, still much needed, to make sense of totalitarianism in our time and to craft a morally serious constitutionalist vision for the twenty-first century.

The 1810 edition of *Principles of Politics* begins with a particularly forceful dissection of "received ideas about the scope of political authority." It is followed by an equally powerful delineation of the true "principles" that ought to replace them. It is in these opening discussions that the reader confronts the originality and humanity of Constantian liberalism. His is a liberalism equidistant from modern doctrines of absolute sovereignty and from any hint of conservative nostalgia for the European old regime. Against those revolutionary doctrinaires who asserted that republics are the only legitimate form of government, Constant recurs to those enduring "principles of

1 *Principles of Politics Applicable to All Governments*, by Benjamin Constant, translated by Dennis O'Keeffe; Liberty Fund, 558 pages, $22.

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politics [that are] independent of all constitutions" and are at the foundation of moderate politics in all its forms. He takes particular aim at the "false metaphysics" that confused human liberty with the unfettered will of the people and which mistook the popular sources of authority for a guarantee of justice and the common good. Without in any way rejecting majority rule as an ordering principle for a free society, Constant renews an older wisdom that affirmed that "there are things too heavy for human hands." He set out to rescue liberalism from that revolutionary inebriation that refused to bow before any sacred limits or restraints.

For Constant, the French revolutionary terror revealed the monstrous consequences of the doctrine of absolute popular sovereignty. The belief that there are no inherent limits on what the sovereign people can do is both profoundly impious and remarkably blind to the tragic possibilities inherent in political life. First and foremost, it ignores that natural justice which is independent of the wills of individuals or peoples. Constant never stopped repeating that "there is a part of human existence which remains individual and independent, and by right beyond all political jurisdiction." But the modern doctrine of popular sovereignty is also based on the fatal delusion that the people in their collective capacity are somehow capable of directly governing themselves. It ignores the necessarily "representative" character of all modern political institutions. Outside of the austere constraints of the classical city, people never govern themselves directly, they are never simply "in charge." The sophistry that equates or masks the dictatorial measures of the few with the "will of the people" reinforces the power of unscrupulous demagogues who will not hesitate to proceed with "the slaughter of the people piecemeal."

Confronted with an unprecedented form of despotism, one seemingly justified by modern philosophical principles, Constant reaffirmed the limits that are at the heart of all decent politics. In marked contradistinction to Hobbes and Rousseau, Constant denies that any government or society has the right to exercise absolute sovereignty of any sort. In *Principles of Politics* as well as in his other major political writings, Constant articulated a liberalism that had learned from the debacle of popular revolution gone awry, a liberalism that would never forget that "sovereignty exists only in a limited or relative way". Like Burke or the French counterrevolutionaries such as Joseph de Maistre, Constant attacks the pretensions of modern philosophy and affirms a spiritual realm or space above the human will. But the ultimate source of these limits upon the human will are ill-defined, to say the least. As Book VIII ("On Religious Freedom") of *Principles of Politics* makes particularly clear, Constant is not a believer in any conventional sense. Ever the romantic, he evokes religion as a reminder of the sublime and as a symbol of the ineffable, a consolation amid misery and a source of generous feelings and noble action. In the end, though, one cannot help but draw the conclusion that, for Constant, religion is something of an illusion, a salutary consolation in a world bereft of sure foundations. Constant saw the need for something like natural law without ever really being able to define its content or to vouch for its reality. He is finally more clear about what he rejects—absolute sovereignty or unlimited willfulness—than he is about what he affirms. In this he is the forerunner of certain anti-totalitarian currents of thought that would become influential in the twentieth century. Faced with the deadly consequences of the totalitarian denial of a natural moral order, a series of prominent philosophers and political thinkers invoked the need for something like the natural law without being able to say very much about its content. Constant is the first modern thinker to limn this "negative" argument for an order of things above the human will. Like many twentieth-century anti-totalitarian thinkers, he is too sophisticated simply or wholly to believe in the old verities and far too decent to dispense with them all together.

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It was Constant's fate to be despised by the partisans of the French Revolution while being alien to the obsessions of counter-revolutionary thought. While Constant opposed modern sophistries about unlimited human will, he remained faithful to the principles of 1789 properly understood. That is, he opposed the excesses of modern philosophical rationalism but never rejected a *rational* articulation of political principles as the French reactionaries were prone to do. In Constant's judgment, there was an underlying, unacknowledged complicity between the most radical of modern revolutionaries and the most determined of their opponents. Both the fanatical friends and the fevered critics of the French Revolution tended to confuse the sophisms that justified revolutionary terror with the principles that are at the foundation of free or moderate politics. Constant adamantly refused this identification. His noble book can best be understood as a vindication of modern liberty against both its false friends and its intransigent enemies. Its false friends defended freedom severed from natural justice and thus provided powerful intellectual support for terror and tyranny. Its reactionary enemies confused the murderous excesses of the French revolution with the true nature of freedom in modern times. Constant understood himself to be the political philosopher of the principled center, the scourge of those who have resigned themselves to despotism in the name of either a glorious past or a glorious future.

More broadly, throughout *Principles of Politics*, Constant defends a conception of robust, constitutional government against the twin evils of anarchy and despotism. Constant's political liberalism appreciates that there can be no guarantee for individual liberties without a strong and effective state that is truly able and willing to govern. Weak governments are ultimately incompatible with political freedom since they invite those in positions of responsibility to usurp those necessary powers that are constitutionally denied to them. Constant, however, directs the full might of his fury at those revolutionary ideologues who justified all sorts of "arbitrary measures" to protect society against real or imagined enemies. To be sure, he in no way denies that a free society has the obligation to defend itself against foreign threats and internal subversion. But in the course of the French Revolution a series of arbitrary and cruel measures were directed against faithful Catholics, members of suspect social groups, those deemed to be potential enemies, and finally those decent souls who refused to identify freedom or patriotism with revolutionary terror. In the guise of protecting "public safety" the various French revolutionary regimes pursued "individual existence into its most intimate retreats." This unjustified resort to emergency measures corrupts political life; it is subversive of those habits that are at the foundation of a peaceful and law-abiding society.

Constant establishes that arbitrary government is a moral blight of the first order. Furthermore, he has a second objection: it is also finally incapable of giving rise to anything permanent or great. It leaves disorder and violence in its wake and more often than not "devours its own children." Constant contrasts the remarkable solidity and vigor of "English freedom" with the divisions, conspiracies, and repression that marked French revolutionary despotism. He points out that political freedom is not merely "a barrier to government" but one of its most powerful supports "guiding it on its way, sustaining it in its efforts, moderating it in its onsets of madness, and encouraging it in its moments of apathy." Constant persuasively argues that only free political life is ultimately capable of combining political legitimacy with political effectiveness. Only a regime of political freedom can give rise to responsible citizens who are truly worthy of their freedom and a government worthy of them.

For Constant, however, freedom is not a unitary thing. Constant famously argued in his 1819 essay on "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared to the Moderns" that freedom means something quite different

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for modern Englishmen, Frenchmen, or Americans then it did for the warrior citizens of the great republics of classical antiquity. This distinction is the subject of the lengthy sixteenth book ("On Political Authority in the Ancient World") of *Principles of Politics*. The broad themes of Constant's discussion are probably familiar enough to contemporary readers: the ancients "brought together great political freedom and an almost total absence of individual freedom" while the moderns prefer peace, individual freedom, and commercial prosperity to the public liberty which was the glory of the ancient world. These differences are not merely one of "life-style preferences" or of "culture differences" as we like to say today. Constant's distinction depends upon a philosophy of history that distinguishes between two great historical dispensations, the old and the new, the ancient and the modern. The ancients are the youth of the human species. We moderns are free to admire the vigor, nobility, energy, and dignity of our ancient forebears. But we must not allow admiration to turn into a deadly, because impossible, form of imitation. "The ancients were right in the youth of moral life. The moderns are in its maturity or perhaps its old age." In keeping with the last ambiguity, we moderns, Constant maintains, are incapable of affirming anything with full conviction. We are the children of skepticism and doubt and therefore cannot return to the noble simplicity of the ancient city. The "modern imitators of antiquity" such as Rousseau were not wrong to admire the greatness of the ancients but their writings provided support for an intolerable despotism because they never came to terms with the *anachronistic* character of ancient liberty in modern times. Constant does not deny that the ancients provide enduring models for that virtue necessary to preserve even a modern society. He writes eloquently about the ongoing real if subordinate role of citizen participation in sustaining a free society. But political freedom in the modern world must be based on respect for individual independence and freedom of thought more than the deliberate and self-conscious cultivation of civic virtue. There is no place for a Numa or Lycurgus in the modern City. When the French revolutionaries attempted to emulate the virtues of antiquity, they not surprisingly inaugurated a new reign of terror. We must read our Plutarch but not attempt to recover some mythical republican treasure. Like Montesquieu, Constant appeals to what Pierre Manent has called the "imaginary" or "aesthetic" authority of ancient virtue. That authority becomes directly political only at our own peril.

The reader of this remarkable work, therefore, is left in something of a quandary. Constant eloquently articulates the permanent principles of free or moderate government but at the same time highlights the inability of modern man to affirm principle with anything resembling conviction. The great French political theorist condemns revolutionary tyranny both for violating natural right and for being an historical anachronism. He defends a natural moral order applicable to man as man and then divides human beings into two seemingly unbridgeable historical dispensations. At various times he appeals to the authority of history and to those verities that transcend all historical change. His writings provide powerful support both for those who condemn modern tyranny as an aberration and those who argue that it is a logical development of certain unwise modern principles. He takes Hobbes, Bentham, and Rousseau to task for providing theoretical support for new forms of despotism and yet characterizes each as a philosopher "friendly to humanity." Constant's thought abounds in paradoxes and more. But it would be a terrible mistake to dismiss Constant as a confused or contradictory thinker. His contradictions are, in truth, the contradictions of all conservative-minded liberals who are wary of thorough-going modernity but know no real alternative to the historical adventure which is "modern liberty." Constant is a necessary companion for every thought-

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ful person who tries to steer a principled middle path between reactionary nostalgia and progressive illusions. His measured, humane liberalism is superior to nearly everything that goes by that name in the contemporary academic and political worlds.

The oval Welshman

Andrew Lycett Dylan Thomas. Overlook Press, 416 pages, $35

reviewed by David Pryce-Jones

"We Poets in our youth begin in gladness;/ But thereof come in the end despondency and madness." Wordsworth was writing about Thomas Chatterton, "the marvellous boy," but these memorable lines have done much to fix a popular and romanticized conception of the poet as someone called to purposes too high to be fulfilled, and therefore destined to burn out in disaster. In the twentieth century, Dylan Thomas was another marvellous boy who seems to prove that the poet's vocation really is stricken. Anyone thinking about him today can only be astonished and saddened by the drinking, profligacy, and philandering left in his wake. The squandering of his gifts looms like some exemplary warning never to be a poet. By the time of his death in 1953, a few days after his thirty-ninth birthday, he was far beyond despondency, and close to madness.

He had gifts all right, something all his own, a supple wordiness with a flair of comedy, even absurdity, about it. "Man should be two tooled, and a poet's middle leg is his pencil." Nobody else, not even Lawrence Durrell, could have written that. The way to seduce a barmaid in a pub, he thought, was to ask, "How would you like to fornicate with an oval Welshman?" Ireland, glimpsed on a flying visit, was "a wild, unlettered, unfrenchlettered country." Writing to George Barker, another poet all over the place, he revealed in a single sentence how self-pity bled into bravado (and all in odd grammar too): "all my friends are failures, I think the glories of the world are mingy, and the people I know and like best—hack Fleet streeters, assistant assistant film-producers, professional drunks, strays and outlaws, who are always, & always will be, just about to write their autobiographies." Philip Larkin was stingy with praise and quick to spot a fraud, but after listening to Thomas do a turn one evening, concluded, "Hell of a fine man: little, snubby, hopelessly pissed bloke who made hundreds of cracks and read parodies of everybody in appropriate voices."

Dylan Thomas's special contribution was to modernize Victorian sentimentality into a contemporary idiom. Sentimentality, critics usually say severely, depicts reality in a cosy light, which must be fatal to a serious writer. Is that necessarily so? Surely sentimentality for some is a welcome escape into a safe landscape, and for others it is a surrender to emotion, not on the grandest scale no doubt, but a lump in the throat is all the same better than indifference. Thomas's poems certainly aspire to be grand, even universal, but the wish for a happy ending flushes tints of pink and mauve through them. The weather is always stormy, the poems declare, but there is no real need to get wet. Take two of his most famous poems, "And death shall have no dominion" and "Do not go gentle into that good night." Both show how close his strength is to his weakness. Undoubted passion sustains the false comfort of the underlying thought. Death is certain to have dominion, and as for going gentle into that good night, the poem contradicts itself with the words of the second verse, "wise men at their end know dark is right."

The gladness of his youth is unmistakable. Like many born and growing up in the city of Swansea, he was a Welshman with an anglicized education and culture. His father was a rather stiff schoolmaster; his mother was kindly, without intellectual pretensions; both of them indulged their son. All his life he was running away from this background, while also regretting and idealizing it. This is the dynamic of *Under Milk Wood*, his play for voices in the manner of Edgar Lee Mas-

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ters's *Spoon River Anthology*, and a masterpiece of sentimentality like no other. Llareggub, his imaginary Welsh village whose name has to be read backwards with a give-away giggle, is a garden paradise of lovable foibles. "We are not wholly bad or good/ Who live our lives under Milk Wood." Flattery of this sort sets an accepting smile of self-congratulation on every face in the audience.

Books by Constantine FitzGibbon, John Malcolm Brinnin, Paul Ferris, and one or two others have already pegged Dylan Thomas securely as another marvellous boy progressing to destruction. Andrew Lycett follows on. Professional biographer that he is, he has tracked down survivors from the storm, and unearthed unpublished notebooks and correspondence here and there. He likes his subject enough not to patronize him as others often do. "Fine" is the adjective he applies to almost all the poems he singles out, refraining from analysis though lapsing into occasional psychobabble about wombs and masturbation and spirituality. The approach is pretty steady, as in the old rhyme: One foot up and one foot down, that's the way to London town.

Dylan Thomas had more than his fair share of good fortune. To borrow a phrase of Cyril Connolly's, the old cats were watching at the mouse-holes of talent the moment he peeked out. Victor Neuburg, a long-forgotten minor literary entrepreneur, published his early poems. John Lehmann, Geoffrey Grigson, Connolly himself, in fact all the old cats, immediately fell over themselves to scoop him up. Edith Sitwell gushed on his behalf. He could write to his friend Vernon Watkins that he had lunched with "Pope" Eliot, who was "charming, a great man, I think, utterly unaffected," discussing for much of the time various methods of curing the rheumatism bothering him that day. A rare objector was Stephen Spender, who accused him of pouring "poetic stuff" as out of a tap. "Love thy neighbour and, if possible, covet his arse," was Dylan Thomas's mockery of the fashionable Auden-Spender style. His refusal to write political poetry was all the more striking because he larded his speech and his letters with the leftist clichés slopping around him.

Poetry in the Thirties was rich and varied, and most of the poets avoided romanticized doom quite as successfully as Wordsworth himself had once done. Dylan Thomas managed to steer a course among them. Sponging from friends proved easy, but when the pinch became unbearable he proved that he could earn money like any other hard-up egghead, writing scripts for the BBC and various film-makers, doing readings on the academic circuit in America. He liked to play cricket and croquet, to swim and go for picnics on the beach, and wanted a house of his own. Suburban respectability was a kernel planted deep in this marvellous boy's soul, and out of it flowered that wondrous sentimentality.

Why, then, did it all go so wrong? Lycett is wise enough to leave open all possible judgments and conclusions. Now and again he suggests that Dylan Thomas was playing the role of poet, turning himself deliberately into something like a trade-mark, living on "guile and beer." Or perhaps some sense of being Welsh set up an insoluble tension when it came to living among the English and writing in their language. Welsh irony and humor are defensive tactics, and they escape measurement. "Land of my Fathers! As far as I'm concerned, my fathers can keep it." Plenty of other *déraciné* intellectuals of Welsh origin have echoed this crack of his, while also making sure to live in Wales, or at least keep a foothold there. The pub-crawling was a latter-day version of Orpheus's descent into hell. At the end of one lecture, he was so drunk that he vomited into the fireplace. Incapacitated, he might well wet the mattress of any bed he passed out on. There seems to be no good reason for so much furious distress. "Ardents" was the contemptuous term he coined for the many women who were in the habit of throwing their impetuous selves at him. Some, for instance Margaret, wife of the

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historian A. J. P. Taylor, sought to mother him. Others, like Pearl Kazin, had fantasies of love. However much they had brought him, he threw them all over ungratefully. Cruelty is the flip side of sentimentality.

Which brings us to Caitlin Macnamara, Cat to him, his wife, the mother of his children. Either she was a bravely bohemian free spirit who blundered into a horror not of her making and was greatly punished for it, or she was Venus intent on her prey, a harpy, destroyer of the hapless curly-haired overgrown baby in her clutches. Either she too was sentimental and cruel by nature, or he obliged her to defend herself by outdoing his bad behavior. Her manners, her rudeness, scourged almost everyone she met. She could stub a cigarette out on the bare arm of someone who irritated her. Deliberately out to humiliate him for his heedless affairs, she picked up rough trade in the streets. When they fought physically, breaking bones and blacking eyes, she gave as good as she got, on occasion frightened that she had killed him. She made sure to spoil his every success. But who was victim, and who victimizer, is anyone's guess.

Lycett's account of the final scenes is bleak. They were apart, he in New York in a chaos of alcohol and medication; she in Wales with the children but no money. A week or so before Dylan Thomas swallowed the fatal eighteen straight whiskies which he boasted about with almost his dying words, but which were probably far fewer in number and anyhow less life-threatening than injections he had received from a doctor, she sent him a telegram: "You have left me no alternative but suicide or the streets. Hate. Caitlin." Flying in and hurrying to the hospital where he had been admitted in a coma, she asked, "Is the fucking man dead yet?" Friends arranged for her admission to a private psychiatric clinic on Long Island.

Years afterwards, a memorial plaque was put up to him in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey, which is an English nod in the direction of immortality. Years afterwards too, Caitlin published a memoir in which she put the blame for everything on drink. A painfully lived reality now reposes in the beautified ending of legend, and the sentimentality of it perfectly fits the modern age.

Blowin' in the wind

Christopher Ricks
Dylan's Visions of Sin.
Ecco (HarperCollins), 528 pages, $26.95

reviewed by Eric Ormsby

Whether writing on Tennyson, Eliot, Housman, Beckett, or many others, Christopher Ricks has always been a critic of exceptional learning and aplomb; that he has been generally given to a somewhat oblique, even eccentric angle of view—embarrassment in Keats, the subtleties of punctuation in Geoffrey Hill—has been to his credit, for while he is in one sense a traditional textual expert of rare authority (witness his editions of Tennyson and T. S. Eliot's smuttier verses), he has also exhibited a delightful ability to surprise. His new book is no exception, less so in its erudition perhaps than in its surprises. Ricks, just named the next Oxford Professor of Poetry, has always been smitten with Bob Dylan; even in *The Force of Poetry*, his 1984 collection of essays, he included considerations of the singer as a poet rather than as a popular performer. It is clear now that his infatuation with the singer—the word is not too strong—has been no passing fancy but constitutes an all-consuming passion. With his new book, Ricks reminds us, on virtually every page, that the word "fan" derives from "fanatic."

All of Ricks's impressive analytical strengths are on display in *Dylan's Visions of Sin*. There is no song, no lyric, no mumbled comment from an interview with Bob Dylan, all cited here with excruciating exactitude, that does not elicit from this most acute of auditors some elaborate and, at times, almost comically inflated gloss. Shakespeare, Milton, Donne, Keats, Larkin,

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and many others are adduced to shore up his case. While Ricks's learning and range of reference remain as impressive as always, the very scale of the enterprise overwhelms its subject. It is hard to think of any singer or composer, however brilliant or original, whose work could stand up to the claims Ricks makes for Dylan; Schubert would have quailed with dismay, Noel Coward would for once have been speechless. There is in truth something annihilating in Ricks's advocacy of Dylan; as I read I found myself wondering at moments if this book did not represent a strenuous effort at self-exorcism, as though subjecting the slightest song and the most casual utterance to such drastic dissection might free the fan at last from his fandom.

As he makes clear in several statements, which Ricks quotes approvingly, Dylan has always been an instinctual, unreflective composer. He is wary, and rightly so, of excessive speculation on "the artistic process." Many of his songs, among them the most famous, have come to him seemingly out of nowhere, and he doesn't care to track them to their sources. Spontaneity, or at least the aura of spontaneity, is crucial to the effect of the best songs, as is a kind of rambling vivacity; and yet in his extended analyses, Ricks freights Dylan's lyrics with so many allusions and references and echoes that the songs seem to have been composed in a graduate seminar rather than on the fly. If Dylan ever reads Ricks's book he may find himself so paralyzed by self-consciousness that he never picks up his guitar again. Emily Dickinson, as usual, put it just right:

> Surgeons must be very careful
> When they take the knife:
> Underneath their fine incisions
> Lurks the culprit: Life!

Ricks's case is this: Bob Dylan is not simply a consummate performer and a marvellous lyricist who revolutionized popular music in America over the last several decades, but a poet and indeed, not just any poet, but a great one, worthy to stand alongside the most illustrious in the language. To make his case Ricks must first establish that Dylan is a poet and that he sees himself as such. Ricks asks, "But is Dylan a poet? For him, no problem." Ricks then quotes from "I Shall Be Free":

> Yippee! I'm a poet and I know it
> Hope I don't blow it.

These immortal lines somehow fail to convince me. But Ricks persists:

> The case for denying Dylan the title of poet could not summarily, if at all, be made good by any open-minded close attention to the words and his ways with them. The case would need to begin with his medium, or rather with the mixed-media nature of song, as of drama. On the page, a poem controls its timing there and then.

Ricks then ushers in, of all people, T. S. Eliot, who he says "showed great savvy in maintaining that 'Verse, whatever else it may or may not be, is itself a system of *punctuation*; the usual marks of punctuation themselves are differently employed.'" Eliot's quite suggestive comment is used, however, only to buttress Ricks's next statement that "a song is a different system of punctuation again." Well, maybe, but what does this prove? Not much, as it turns out, for Ricks has inserted the Eliot citation only to lead into Bob Dylan's use of the word "punctuate" in an interview. The interviewer had asked him, "It's the sound that you want?" And Dylan replies, "Yeah, it's the sound and the words. Words don't interfere with it. They—they—punctuate it. You know, they give it purpose [*Pause*]." So besotted is Ricks with Dylan that he can remark about this diffident and unassuming reply, "this is itself dramatic punctuation, though perfectly colloquial" and then add, parenthetically, "and Dylan went on to say 'Chekhov is my favourite writer.'" Come again? Ricks appears not to have noticed Dylan's rather revealing statement that

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"words don't interfere"; he sees more significance in that "[*Pause*]" about which he comments "the train of thought being that punctuation, a system of pointing, gives point." At such passages in the book—and there are, alas, many—even the best disposed reader cannot help wondering what exactly Professor Ricks has been smoking.

I for one am perfectly prepared to acknowledge that Bob Dylan is a poet and sometimes a fine one. Certainly many of his lyrics are superior to much of what passes for poetry nowadays in America; they are marked by strong and sometimes subtle rhythms, they rhyme wittily, they deal with themes of general import rather than mere coterie or private concerns, and, best of all, they are remembered by people who don't usually read poetry or even care about it. His songs have always been suspiciously literary; that, together with what Philip Larkin, in a review which Ricks cites, called his "cawing, derisive voice," helps to account for their novelty and appeal. But his poems on the page and his poems as sung are not quite the same thing. I would argue that it is virtually impossible for anyone who has heard "Desolation Row" or "Blowin' in the Wind" or indeed any of the well-known songs to read them purely as poems. To read the words (for anyone, that is, of my and Professor Ricks's generation) is to conjure up Dylan's voice as well as the tunes and the accompaniment, and to do so irresistibly. And I feel sure that if a Dylan "poem" were to be declaimed straight at a poetry reading anywhere, the audience would immediately begin humming the tune. Of course, this doesn't mean that they aren't poems, as Ricks claims, but rather that they demand a different kind of reading. Ricks knows this and tries mightily, often invoking particular performances or recordings, but the fundamental problem remains and it weakens his argument.

As Ricks also knows, to write a learned tome about Dylan's lyrics without the music is as misleading as it would be to analyze his tunes without regard to the words. Pretentious as it must sound, each song, even the slightest, is after all a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which melody, lyrics, and backup combine to produce the final effect, and this is as true of Bob Dylan as it is of Johnny Mercer or Irving Berlin. Moreover, Ricks almost completely ignores the musical milieu and context out of which Dylan's art developed and says hardly anything about, say, the Blues. Anyone who has ever heard Blind Willie Johnson singing "Dark Was the Night" knows that Dylan (who would be the first to acknowledge his indebtedness) has no monopoly on a sense of sin or a raspy and compelling voice.

Stripped of their music, too many of the lyrics lie flat on the page:

> I wish that for just one time
> You could stand inside my shoes
> And just for that one moment
> I could be you

Others read better but again depend for their intended effect on the music from which, in the end, they are inseparable. Take "Sad-Eyed Lady of the Lowlands," a song which Ricks compares to Swinburne's "Dolores" and which opens:

> With your mercury mouth in the missionary times
> And your eyes like smoke and your prayers like rhymes
> And your silver cross, and your voice like chimes
> Oh, who among them do they think could bury you?

Seen on the page, the alliteration of the first line hums too emphatically, the threefold rhyme has a singsong quality and the fourth line scans (and reads) clumsily. But these very features of the stanza tip us off at once that this is not meant to be a read poem; we sense instinctively that we are encountering a song, not a formal poem. Our ears alert us that what weighs down the page will be lightened by the living voice and that the words, in fact,

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must be heavier and more obtrusive than normal in order to stand up to the musical accompaniment. As a result, and without being able to help it, we read such a poem differently than we read "Dolores":

> Cold eyelids that hide like a jewel
> Hard eyes that grow soft for an hour;
> The heavy white limbs, and the cruel
> Red mouth like a venomous flower.

Swinburne's stanza, for all its conspicuous musicality, does not lend itself to song. In Swinburne, the music, for better or worse, is in the words; in Dylan, the words stand in a sort of anticipatory suspension, awaiting the music. In his exegesis of this song, which he calls "a masterpiece," Ricks deploys a formidable array of learned references, citing *The Oxford English Dictionary* (to gloss "mercury"), T. S. Eliot, Matthew Arnold, Keats, Carlyle, Tennyson, and the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah, as well as Swinburne. But why Swinburne, or any of the others, is brought into the discussion is never made clear; the whole discussion is something of a *tour de force* without the *tour*. And while ransacking his sources Ricks often overlooks the obvious. He is puzzled by the phrase "mercury mouth" which he opines may signify "a death-dealing poison" without once considering that it may be the tremulous skittering of spilled mercury that is meant; in other words, the sad-eyed lady's mouth is aquiver. (And while we're at it, why not adduce Auden's line "The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day?")

It matters little to Ricks that Dylan himself may be blissfully ignorant of all his supposed sources (or "analogues," as Ricks prefers to call them). The smallest smidgeon of a resemblance calls forth reams of commentary, much of it far-fetched. Consider, for example, Ricks's comparison of Dylan's "Lay, Lady, Lay" with John Donne's "To His Mistress Going to Bed." The Dylan song begins thus:

> Lay, lady, lay, lay across my big brass bed
> Stay, lady, stay, stay with your man awhile
> Until the break of day, let me see you make
> him smile.

The professor in Ricks cannot refrain from noting the solecism of "lay" which would be, as he puts it, coyly reverting to Latin, "*Anglicè*, lie across it." (I can't say that I've ever heard anybody say "lay across the bed" but then I haven't met the sad-eyed lady or her pals.) Ricks tries to excuse this by pointing out that Dylan could hardly have written "Lie, Lady, Lie" as this would be "men accusing of mendacity the fair sex"—never mind that accusations of mendacity are not exactly uncommon in popular music (has Ricks never heard "Your Cheatin' Heart?"). When he comes to compare Dylan with Donne, however, Ricks truly clutches at straws, all of which are definitely blowin' in the wind. In an unconvincing table he sets out the analogies; thus, both poets use the words "bed" and "show" and "world" and "standing" and "still," to mention but these. Ricks comments, "Donne's poem might be a source but what matters is that it is an analogue. Great minds feel and think alike." It doesn't occur to Ricks that even not-so-great minds tend to use the same words when welcoming a naked woman into their beds.

Ricks's fatal penchant for exaggeration in everything to do with Bob Dylan the artist and the man mars his book, for all its learning and ingenuity and occasionally superb explications of certain songs. We read, for example, that "Bob Dylan is one of the great rhymesters of all time." While Dylan does show verve and agility in his rhymes, all of which Ricks dutifully inventories, will we really compare him to such poets as Byron or Browning or Pope as a "rhymester?" Even the most cursory glance at any page of *Don Juan* or *The Rape of the Lock* gives the lie to Ricks's claim. Again we are told that Dylan's album *Desire* is "an inspired title for an album." Why? Because the word "desire" is "a word that knows too much to argue or to judge: its lips are sealed." Sealed lips don't bode well for an

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album of songs and what is particularly "inspired" about the title? Ricks never explains; he merely asseverates. Perhaps most irritating are the occasional comparisons of Bob Dylan with Shakespeare, as when Ricks remarks in passing that Dylan's "art is something else, not being a business but a vocation, even while—like Shakespeare's—it earns his living." Even more amazingly he can declare that "not since *King Lear* has there been so tensile a tissue of eyes and seeing . . . as is woven through 'Precious Angel.'" And elsewhere he states "within a performing art—Shakespeare's tragedies, Dylan's songs—the ear possesses an extraordinary compensation for its sacrifice of the particular certainty that the eye can command." I have no idea what Ricks means by this assertion but the casual equation of Shakespeare and Dylan, which forms a leitmotif of the whole book, induces a sense of vertigo compounded by equal parts of hilarity and incredulity.

Ricks structures his discussion of Dylan's songs by grouping them in accord with the seven deadly sins (hence the title) followed by the four cardinal virtues (Justice, Prudence, Temperance, and Fortitude) and "the heavenly graces" (Faith, Hope, and Charity). This is probably far too schematic, as he himself acknowledges, and he is forced to do a bit of stretching to make the songs fit into their appointed categories, but it isn't preposterous and here Ricks, for all his vagaries, does make a convincing case. He is especially fine when he comes to discuss Dylan's "Christian" songs and the "born again" phase in his career that occasioned such dismay among many fans. An avowed atheist, Ricks deals with the jubilantly Christian songs such as "Precious Angel" or "Highway 61 Revisited" with tact and insight, and his enviable command of scripture stands him in good stead in his explications. Of those who denounced Dylan for his new-found faith he remarks aptly that "most Dylan-lovers are presumed to be liberals, and the big trap for liberals is always that our liberalism may make us very illiberal about other people's sometimes letting us all down by declining to be liberals. The illiberal liberal has a way of pretending that the page that he would rather not read is illegible."

For the die-hard Dylan fan who comes to Ricks's book fresh from the music, and without any particular literary preconceptions, *Dylan's Visions of Sin* will no doubt prove eye-opening. The discussions of individual songs, however eccentric or even downright batty, are invariably interesting; even when Ricks overreaches, his comments on the poems he draws on as parallels—whether by Larkin or Hardy or William Barnes or Longfellow—stimulate and illumine. His rather breezy conversational style can become annoying and his addiction to puns off-putting (the worst may be "gendresult," an amalgam of "gender" and "end-result," which I hope does not catch on), but he is incapable of writing a dull page. If too often you hear the dim crunch of a butterfly being broken on a wheel, you forgive Ricks because of the deep, if immoderate, affection he holds for his subject. At the same time, and speaking only for myself, I just hope he doesn't now move on to The Boss or The King.

The Napoleonic code

Alistair Horne
The Age of Napoleon.
Modern Library, 240 pages, $21.95

reviewed by Marc Arkin

In 1801, First Consul for Life Napoleon Bonaparte sent an army of 35,000 men to take control of the city of New Orleans, the key to the vast territory returned to France in 1800 by secret treaty with Spain. Along the way, the expeditionary force was supposed to make a quick detour and put down Toussaint L'Ouverture's slave revolt on Hispaniola, thus securing French influence in the Caribbean and, incidentally, a source of refined sugar to feed France's insatiable sweet tooth. As with many of Napoleon's

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overseas campaigns, the enterprise didn't work out as planned. Virtually the entire force was wiped out before it reached Louisiana; whoever wasn't killed by the rebels died of yellow fever instead. Thwarted in his ambitions, Napoleon offered to sell France's entire North American territory to the United States at the fire sale price of fifteen million dollars—three cents an acre—a strategic bargain that sealed the fortune of the new nation.

The reader will learn little of this in Alistair Horne's amiable short history *The Age of Napoleon*. Instead, the sale of Louisiana appears as a toss-away gesture to prevent America from falling into the enemy camp while Napoleon turned his attention to invading England (1803–1805). It seems that Talleyrand, Napoleon's foreign minister at the time, had passed the worst of the French Revolution in Philadelphia (of all places); while there, with his usual acuity, Talleyrand recognized that, notwithstanding eight years of war, the population remained British at heart, with sympathies likely to follow in any conflict between England and France. According to Horne, it was this "sensible advice" from Talleyrand that led Napoleon to use Louisiana as a diplomatic sweetener to secure the friendship of Jefferson's administration. Others have thought that Napoleon counted on the British navy taking New Orleans during any future hostilities, so Talleyrand's far more "sensible advice" was to fatten France's war chest by giving up title to territory that Napoleon expected to lose anyway.

The sort of thing the reader will learn in this delightfully gossipy book is that Josephine was a ravishing beauty despite her blackened stubs of teeth, ruined by a childhood of chewing Martiniquais sugar cane, and that her pug bit the future emperor on the leg during the crucial moment of their wedding night. The reader will also learn how many dresses Josephine had in her closet when her wardrobe was inventoried in 1809, about the time Napoleon divorced her to marry Marie-Louise of Austria (unfortunately, the reader will learn that twice within about five pages, but it's still worth knowing): she had 666 winter dresses, 230 summer ones—and, "toujours la Creole," only "two pairs of knickers." In fact, the reader will hear about Josephine's Creole background a few too many times for absolute comfort, as in repeated references to "the voracious sexual appetite of the hot-blooded Creole."

As befits a book that treats the entire Napoleonic Era in fewer than 200 pages, Horne assumes a working knowledge—or at least a cheerful ignorance—of the various battles, alliances, campaigns, and revised alliances of the Napoleonic era. And, if the reader really cared about such matters, I suppose there are books aplenty about Rivoli, Marengo, Ulm, and Austerlitz, or, for that matter, about Napoleon's disastrous Peninsular Campaign against the combined Anglo-Spanish-Portuguese armies led by Arthur Wellesley (later the first Duke of Wellington) and Napoleon's even more disastrous invasion of and retreat from Russia. This is also a book for people—like me—who want to know that Wellington and Napoleon both bedded an actress named Mademoiselle George, and that she famously, if indiscreetly, proclaimed the Iron Duke "le plus fort." She said this, of course, after Waterloo (the reader also learns that one twice). This is also a volume for people who want to know that one of the ways Frenchmen avoided service in the Grande Armée was to knock out their front teeth, essential for tearing the paper off musket cartridges in the heat of battle. (And yes, that bit of wonderful information is also a repeat offender.)

Horne's treatment of Napoleon is the latest in the Modern Library Chronicles, a series of short popular accounts of subjects ranging from Islam to the joint-stock company; it is intended to be the historian's version of a beach book, a niche it fits splendidly. Sensibly, given his brief, Horne has chosen to focus on the social and cultural changes during the period of Napoleon's peak influence, from 1795, when he

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received his first post with political clout, to 1820, when his presence was still felt in a shaky Bourbon restoration. Although the bedroom trivia is really the draw—did you know that, while working in a Philadelphia bookstore during the Terror, Talleyrand's patron, Saint-Mery, introduced contraceptives to America?—Horne actually manages to cram in some respectable history and analysis into his account as well.

In particular, because Horne is the author of at least one book on the architectural history of Paris, he is especially strong on Napoleon's vast public works in the capital. Napoleon intended to make Paris "the most beautiful city in the world," notwithstanding the occasional fantasy about escaping from the city's annoying inhabitants by founding an entirely new capital in Lyons—"a habitation worthy of my rank and fortune"—renamed "Napoleonville." From moving the city's cemetery to the suburban estate of the confessor of Louis XIV, Père de La Chaise, to building a sixty-mile-long canal to provide fresh water to the city, from carving new streets and plazas out of the medieval city to reconstructing the quais and bridges along the Seine to protect against flooding, Napoleon put his stamp on the city. Even as his regime was reeling from the failed Russian campaign, the War of the Fourth Coalition, famine, and economic disarray, Paris remained one vast construction site. As Horne recounts, when the king of Württemberg was asked, during an 1810 visit, what he thought of Paris, he replied, "Fine, for a town that the architects have taken by assault."

Horne also perceptively discusses the manner in which Napoleon both changed and built upon French culture, in ways that persist to the present—and not only in his incessant pursuit of "la Gloire." Horne argues that Napoleon centralized French government and cultural life—even down to fashion, theater, and food—to an extent unrealized even by that great centralizer Louis XIV, leaving the provinces to remain dismal backwaters. Napoleon's school reforms alone ensured that in every French lycée, at any given hour, French students were studying exactly the same subject in exactly the same way. Although the army was a meritocracy, Horne notes also its reliance on the graduates of a few specialized schools ultimately recreated a system of elites that favored the old aristocracy and bourgeoisie. But, in the short run, with the shrewd creation of public favors such as the Légion d'Honneur, Napoleon fashioned a classless civic elite built solely on loyalty to his person.

Napoleon also reorganized the French government so that he had personal control of its minutest details even while in the field. Thus, during the campaigns of 1805–1807, during which Napoleon was out of Paris for 306 days, he never missed a beat. A steady stream of letters emanated from his headquarters supervising everything from the illumination of Paris to the scripts of new plays and his brother's piles (apply leeches: another worthwhile fact to add to one's store of knowledge). Nowhere was Napoleon's centralizing hand more clearly evident than in the creation of the uniform Code Napoleon, his most enduring achievement, even in his own eyes, and which, by destroying primogeniture, put the final nail in the coffin of the ancien régime.

As André Maurois observed, Napoleon "believed in equality and did not believe in liberty." Horne makes a convincing case that Napoleon was not a revolutionary, but an enlightenment opportunist with a technocratic and authoritarian bent. Although he rose to power under the Directory, Napoleon was never comfortable with the Parisian masses. Instead, he kept them in check with a carrot and stick: spectacles, parades, public fêtes, and dreams of glory in the Grande Armée on the one hand—dreams that probably cost France over one million casualties out of a total population of 33 million—and tight press control, censorship of the theater (which was a vital force in molding public opinion), and a very efficient secret police on the other.

Napoleon's fundamental distrust of Pari-

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sian loyalties was well justified in light of the repeated volte-faces of allegiance that accompanied the collapse of his regime: the Russian entry into the city in 1814, the subsequent Bourbon restoration, the Napoleonic return in the Hundred Days, the final defeat at Waterloo, and the reoccupation of Paris by the English and Prussians—each was cheered by the French public in its turn. As Napoleon disdainfully said, "They are cowards who change their sovereign as they change their shirt." Or, in true French fashion, as the Marquise de Coigny remarked of the hordes of British strolling the Bois de Boulogne after Waterloo, "It is so like a fête that it's a pity it's a conquest." Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. For these wonderful nuggets alone, the book is worth the read.

So very Irish

Benedict Kiely
The Collected Stories of Benedict Kiely. David R. Godine, 762 pages, $24.95

reviewed by Brooke Allen

That Benedict Kiely is not a well-known name in this country is a sign either of American provincialism or Irish provincialism—probably both. Kiely, now in his eighties, has long been one of Ireland's best writers. The first of his nine novels was published in 1946, the most recent in 1985; he has also written seven nonfiction books on Ireland and four volumes of short stories. In 1996 he was named Saoi of Aosdana, the highest honor given by the Arts Council of Ireland. Considered by many of his compatriots to be comparable to the likes of Edna O'Brien and William Trevor, Kiely has remained a specialized taste on this side of the Atlantic.

Maybe this is because his work is so very Irish: Kiely is deeply rooted in the rural and small-town culture of his youth, so that his work and the world he creates (or recreates) has sometimes been compared with that of Faulkner. It is not, I think, a good comparison. Kiely's vision is infinitely lighter and brighter than the American's; though he deals with two world wars and the seemingly endless and endlessly suppurating wound caused by the partition of Ireland, and while he is obsessed with the twin tragedies of mutability and loss, his essential sunniness nearly always sheds a softening light on these somber themes and events. His voice and his point of view are consummately humane, and in a country rent apart by political and religious prejudice he is notable for a mellow and apparently all-encompassing tolerance.

Take "The Dogs in the Great Glen"—not Kiely's best story, nor his most memorable, but certainly one of his most characteristic. It deals with an American college professor who has come to Ireland, like so many, to search for his roots. He has lost the address of his father's relatives, to whom he has written about his imminent arrival; all he can remember is the name of a place, the great Glen of Kanareen. He and the narrator, a local who has offered to help him, wend their way across the country, the American regaling the local with his father's memories of his grandfather's exploits: "My father told me . . . that one night coming home from the card-playing my grandfather slipped down fifteen feet of rock and the only damage done was the ruin of one of two bottles of whisky he had in the tail-pockets of his greatcoat. The second bottle was unharmed."

Finally, they approach what they believe to be the Glen. "Another fifty yards and we would be on top of the ridge," recalls the narrator. "We kept our eyes on the ground, fearful of the moment of vision and, for good or ill, revelation. Beyond the ridge there might be nothing but a void to prove that his grandfather had been a dreamer or a liar." But as they mount the ridge it is all there just as described: "It gathered the sunshine into a gigantic coloured bowl." The two travelers descend into a cloud-bedecked, primeval beauty. They are greeted by growling dogs, a troupe of shy children,

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and a tall old man who immediately recognizes the voyager: "I knew you from the top of the Glen. You have the same gait my brother had, the heavens be his bed. My brother that was your grandfather." The narrator, standing back, gathers his impressions of the reunion.

> It was moonlight, I thought, not sunlight, over the great Glen. From house to house, the dogs were barking, not baying the moon, but to welcome home the young men from the card-playing over the mountain. The edges of rock glistened like quartz. The tall young gambler came laughing down the Glen, great-coat swinging open, waving in his hand the one bottle of whisky that hadn't been broken when he tumbled down the spink. The ghosts of his own dogs laughed and leaped and frolicked at his heels.

Exile; return; an almost supernatural interdependence of past and present: all these are hallmarks of Kiely's work. "The Dogs in the Great Glen" is a simple story, in which the author's customary themes are presented quietly and with great beauty. Other stories take the same themes and weave them into superbly complex, technically virtuosic patterns.

The David R. Godine Press in Boston has now published *The Collected Stories of Benedict Kiely* in a single volume. At 762 pages it makes a rather cumbersome book, but it is good to have all this fine material in one place: Kiely's four story collections (*A Journey to the Seven Streams* [1963], *A Ball of Malt and Madame Butterfly* [1973], *A Cow in the House* [1978], and *A Letter to Peachtree* [1987]), as well as his classic novella, *Proxopera* (1977).

Kiely was born in the village of Dromore in County Tyrone (Northern Ireland) and brought up in the larger town of Omagh. The pastoral scenes of his childhood and youth are recalled throughout his work with an almost Dylan Thomas-esque lyricism heightened by a perfect ear for the song and rhyme that lie at the bottom of Irish speech. Here is a characteristic example (from "A Journey to the Seven Streams"):

> [W]ith every evidence of jubilation, we were once again under way; and a day it was, made by the good God for jubilation. The fields, all the colours of all the crops, danced towards us and away from us and around us; and the lambs on the green hills, my father sang, were gazing at me and many a strawberry grows by the salt sea, and many a ship sails the ocean. The roadside trees bowed down and then gracefully swung their arms up and made music over our heads and there were more birds and white cottages and fuchsia hedges in the world than you would readily imagine.

Kiely mixes dialogue, thought, and scraps of song and poetry into a brew that is not quite stream-of-consciousness and not quite conventional narrative. He has developed this idiolect by making use (like James Joyce, to whom he, like so many Irish writers, is perhaps too deeply in debt) of the French system of punctuation, using a dash instead of quotation marks, with no indication of where the speech ends. This makes for imprecise writing—the English system divides speech and narrative much more exactly—but suits Kiely's purpose, which is to blend speech almost imperceptibly into thought. At its most extreme this can become an irritating affectation, tempting the reader to think Joyce's influence not so much an inspiration to his younger compatriots as a sort of curse that has condemned them forever to imitate him without ever quite catching up. At its best, though, when Kiely is really in the flow state, the result is not Joyce or imitation Joyce but pure Kiely, something entirely personal (here, from *Proxopera*):

> The pistol, really touching his head, pushes him towards the car. His son stands silent, chained in the market-place amid the gathering multitude that shrank to hear his name, men without hands, girls without legs in restaurants in Belfast, images of Ireland Gaelic

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> and free, never till the latest day shall the memory pass away of the gallant lives thus given for our land. . . . These mad dogs have made outrage a way of life. To the wheel, to the wheel, time's ticking away, in the town the churchbells are ringing, Catholic Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, all calling people away from each other to get them in the end by various routes, *variis itineribus* to the home in the heavens of the same omnipotent, omnipresent Great Father with a long white beard, but why not unite here and now and not wait for then, come all to church good people good people come and pray, and the angel of death is at the wheel or on the wing, and ye know neither the day nor the hour.

Kiely country is neither large nor sophisticated. There is the generic small town, typified by Ballyclogher, "the old, humpy roofs, the two or three spires, and all around the blue circle of quiet hills." There is the bigger town, usually containing a monastery or convent, and entertaining rather more worldly pretensions. There is the seaside resort, as heady with erotic possibility as Paris: "Bracing breezes, silvery sands, booming breakers, lovely lands. Come to Bundoran"—a bit of advertising doggerel that Kiely repeats and dwells on as lovingly as any line of poetry in his repertoire. Then there is the city, specifically Belfast: before the bombs, as innocently exciting to a young man from the country as Bundoran; after them, a mess of burned-out buildings and checkpoints and barricades, destroyed by mindless hatred.

Many of Kiely's stories are triumphant, involving some sort of escape or a declaration of independence. The prison bars, as we all know, are always there: social convention, religion, the dead hand of tradition, pretension; age trying to tame youth; women trying to tame men and *vice versa*. In "The Pilgrims" a thirteen-year-old boy breaks away from his religious parents on a group pilgrimage and kisses an older girl in the train; in "The House in Jail Square" another boy, compelled by his mother to board with two domineering maiden ladies while he attends school, finally rebels and as a result is able to live in the wonderful, masculine freedom of the town's louche boarding house.

But too often, as too often in life, there is no escape. In the excellent "Rich and Rare Were the Gems She Wore," an elegant Dublin girl, Fanny, spends a day with a slickly handsome American major on wartime leave. He expects a certain outcome to their day together, but Fanny knows no middle ground between virginity and complete perdition. A good Catholic girl, she ends the day crying in bed with her rosary, while her major finds consolation elsewhere. In "Through the Fields in Gloves," a middle-aged man feels so trapped and depressed by life with his morbidly obese wife and half-witted sister that he becomes unhinged. And in "Bluebell Meadow," a Catholic highschool girl and a Protestant boy are attracted to one another, but being well-behaved young people and solid members of their communities they are soon talked out of their flirtation. Their story is not a personal tragedy—they never even get to know each other well enough to fall in love—but it indicates, in its subdued and understated way, a national tragedy: they, and thousands like them, will never know one another, never even know what they might be missing.

It would be hard to call Kiely a political writer; his principal gifts are lyricism, exuberance, and appreciation for beauty. But his stubborn refusal, in these stories, to countenance political motivations and agendas amounts to a political statement in its own right. He has depicted himself, of course, in many of the boys and young men who show up in his stories, eager for a good time, an evening with a pretty girl, a day of freedom in the country, but he has also depicted himself, or at least his philosophy, in the elderly Mr. Binchy of *Proxopera*, a well-to-do gentleman who is forced by IRA "soldiers" (in reality pathetic and ignorant local boys) to plant a bomb in a public spot

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in his town—if he refuses, his son and grandchildren will die. Mr. Binchy's nonsectarian anger and pity are beautifully depicted, making *Proxopera* a masterpiece of protest fiction.

The American writer with whom Kiely can best be compared is probably not Faulkner but Eudora Welty. As with Welty, Kiely's deep roots, lifelong connection with his chosen turf, and masterful control of its vernacular make him one of the preeminent regional writers of his time. But Kiely's career, like Welty's, also shows the limits of regionalism. Like her, he is a little too in love with his native milieu, too quickly seduced by its easy charm and too confident that his readers will be seduced as well. As Welty could descend into folksy cuteness—*The Ponder Heart* is a prime example—so can Kiely: all of the tales in his final volume, and especially its title story, "A Letter to Peachtree," display self-indulgent rambling, and a blithe confidence that style and manner, rich atmosphere, sentiment, and a command of the local language will suffice in the absence of structure and meaning and real emotional content.

But Kiely redeems himself in his best work, with tragedy or sadness trumping sentiment, and beauty overcoming charm. There are enough of these fine stories to make this volume well worth obtaining—not to be read all at once, but slowly and lingeringly, one or two stories at a time.

Made in myth

James M. Redfield
The Locrian Maidens:
Love and Death in Greek Italy.
Princeton University Press,
459 pages, $55

reviewed by Tom Meaney

Epizephyrian Locri is a no man's land for classicists. Those who study this strange Greek colony on the Italian peninsula—and few do—tend to begin with the Locrian sage Zaleucas, the earliest known lawgiver in ancient Greece. Zaleucas made some very good laws for Epizephyrian Locri. His laws were so good, in fact, that when Pythagoras came to offer his services to the city, the citizens met Pythagoras at the border and said:

> We, Pythagoras, hear that you are a man both wise and able. But since we find no fault with our own laws, we for our part will try to stand by our established order. Therefore go somewhere else, taking from us anything you might need.

Thanks, but no thanks. The Locrians were content to sit civilly on the sidelines of Greek civilization and fan the glory of their neighbor Syracuse. As James M. Redfield writes in his new book, *The Locrian Maidens: Love and Death in Greek Italy*, "When all the other great Greek cities were deeply engaged in making history—which is to say, in the struggle for power—the Locrians seem to have been content to settle for happiness." The Locrians looked neither to Sparta nor to Athens for cultural guidance. They had their own distinct way of being Greek.

The Locrians were one of the original Greek peoples. According to Pindar, they were the offspring of the rocks that Deucalion—the Greek Noah—brought down with him from Parnassus after the great flood. Old-world Locris was comprised of two discontinuous territories on the Greek mainland, stretching from Euboea to the Corinthian gulf. In the seventh century B.C., these people founded one of the earliest colonies in Southern Italy: Epizephyrian Locri. This colony became one of the major cities on the western frontier.

Redfield sees little similarity between the Locrian colony and the motherland, although he contends that the two cities acknowledged the same foundational myth—that of the Locrian maidens (of his book's title). The legend goes that during the sack of Troy, the "lesser" Locrian Ajax, who plays second fiddle to the "greater" Telamonian Ajax in the *Iliad*, tried to rape Cassandra

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while she held on to the Palladium, a wooden statue of Athena given to the Trojans by the gods. The rape itself would have presented few problems to the Greek conscience, were not Cassandra clutching the figure of Athena so tightly that Ajax knocked the statue off its plinth. The scene is a favorite among black figure vase painters—Cassandra holds on, the Palladium tumbles, and Ajax gets cursed by the Goddess. To atone for the sins of Ajax, the old-world Locrians sent two maidens to serve at the temple of Athena at Troy. They then promised to replace them each year for 1,000 years.

Redfield reads the ritual as a form of social reconstructive surgery: the maidens serve to repair Cassandra's virginity, and the male citizens who accompany them are purified versions of the Troy-bound hero. When these maidens returned home each year, they became the most coveted brides in the land. Their sacred service amplified their virginity, and the special protection granted to them by Athena made them living symbols of integrity for the entire community.

The Epizephyrian Locrians didn't send virgins to sea, but they invested their women with a certain preciousness. Redfield points to the preponderance of women's effects in Epizephyrian graves—hand mirrors, perfume bottles, cosmetics—which suggests an emphasis on femininity that goes beyond what archaeologists typically dig up on the Greek mainland. The Locrians *pinakes* (painted terracotta tablets unique to the Locrians) depict marriage celebrations, intimate illustrations of wives with their husbands, and other domestic scenes rare in the rest of Greece.

The myth presents a tenuous relationship, maybe, between the two Locri, but Redfield sees it as shaping a common model for wives in the two Locri: not quite "free agents" like Spartan women, nor cloistered like Athenian wives, but somewhere in between the two. The Athenians were so obsessed with citizenship—Pericles told the Athenians to treat the city like a lover—that marital bliss seems to have been a secondary concern. (We have to wait until Menander, after the politically charged fifth century is over, before we get any boy-meets-girl romances in Greek literature.) For the Spartans, meanwhile, women were basically flawed male citizens, capable of steering the state only in times of emergency.

The problem with sociological books that borrow from structural anthropology is that they risk imposing their own rules of behavior on their subjects. Redfield avoids this trap with his keep appreciation of the ambiguities at stake in the texts and iconographic evidence. The book also includes valuable essays on Orphic death rites and Greek economic development in general. *The Locrian Maidens* actually uncovers something new in the heavily trodden terrain of the classics, and in today's academy that amounts to a *rara avis*.

Editor's note: Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish during July or August. Our next issue will appear in September. Readers are invited to visit *The New Criterion*'s web page at www.newcriterion.com, where we plan to post new material from time to time this summer.

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Notebook

Making the grandest tour

by Robert Messenger

The Tour de France is the most arduous of the world's sporting events. Riders cover more than 2,000 miles in three weeks at an average speed of around twenty-eight miles per hour. The race can seem more like a test of simple endurance than a display of athletic prowess. The sheer physical effort involved makes it easy to write about its champions in terms of epic poetry.

The race defies ordinary explanation. It is a team sport in which an individual wins. It is an athletic event that actually harms the athletes' bodies. (Racers cannot consume enough food to replace the 6,000 or so calories burned off by each day's stage. Most finish the race with less muscle mass than they began with.) The race's founder, Henri Desgrange, wanted it to be so tough that there would be only a single finisher. He never got his wish, but the sport he set in motion takes such a savage toll on its riders that studies show that the life expectancy of a professional cyclist is barely more than fifty years.

The story of the race is well told in Geoffrey Wheatcroft's recent book *Le Tour: A History of the Tour de France, 1903–2003*.[1] Not a cycling journalist but a writer of excellent histories and superior literary journalism, Wheatcroft tells the tale with ease and charm. He interweaves his straight chronological chapters with seven evocative essays on the regions of France where the race has made its grandest mark. It is a clever gambit. Among other things it allows him to reflect on such larger issues as how the Tour reinforces a certain idea of France, the Tour during the Great War, sponsorship, and the use of pain-killing and performance-enhancing drugs in the event.

Le Tour also offers fetching anecdotes:

> His question brought to mind the cruel saying of the great historian Sir Lewis Namier that, since the fifteenth century, no Italian army has ever beaten anything apart from another Italian army.

> It was Virot who, not long before his death, had given Anquetil a piece of advice: "If you concentrate on making money, you'll lose races if you concentrate on winning races, you'll make money." This was the cycling version of Pushkin's maxim, "write for pleasure and publish for money."

Wheatcroft is about as good a writer as cycling can hope to inspire, but I have two reservations about the book. The first could easily be rectified. The book has an unacceptable number of gaffes. Names are misspelled, team members are misidentified, statistics are mixed-up. My other reservation concerns what's missing. Wheatcroft has left out much of the heroic lore of the Tour. As a fan, I revel in the retelling of famous epic

1 *Le Tour: a History of the Tour de France, 1903–2003*, by Geoffrey Wheatcroft; Simon & Schuster (U.K.), 320 pages, £16.99.

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stages. The names of the most difficult climbs have real evocative power: l'Alpe d'Huez, Tourmalet, Galibier, Mont Ventoux, Col d'Izoard, Hautacam, Puy-de-Dôme. The stories of the racers attacking over these fearsome passes is what first hooks us on the Tour.

The race began in 1903 as a stunt to improve the circulation fortunes of an upstart sporting newspaper, *L'Auto-Vélo*. Desgrange and his young colleague George Lefebvre came up with the idea of a six-day race that would travel all around the hexagon of France (their competitor *Le Vélo* sponsored the Paris-Brest-Paris one-day race). Sixty riders began the 1,500-mile ordeal, which was won by Maurice Garin—the "Little Chimney Sweep"—after more than ninety-four hours of racing. The stages, though having rest days in between, averaged more than fifteen hours, and the riders raced through the night and all manner of hazardous weather. They needed luck as well as endurance since no aid could be given a rider if he had a mechanical problem on the course.

The race was so popular that, much to their surprise, Desgrange and Lefebvre got to plan a second edition. So began the Tour's epic period: three decades when the riders were pushed to the physical edge. In 1919 the Tour's lasting symbol was introduced: the yellow jersey. The race was drawing enthusiastic crowds across France, and Desgrange had the inspiration to put the race leader in a bright yellow jersey (*maillot jaune*) and make him identifiable to all the fans on the roadside. (It was also a marketing ploy; *L'Auto*, as it became known, was printed on yellow paper.)

In these years, the race was alternately dominated by Frenchmen and Belgians. This changed with the advent of Antonin Magne (winner 1931 and 1934), the first rider of whom it can be said that, like today's champions, he won by preparation—he spent his springs training in the high Pyrenées. Magne's battles with André Leducq (winner 1930 and 1932) and Sylvère Maes (winner 1936 and 1939) through the Thirties were the point at which the Tour became a professional sporting event rather than a display of stamina. Desgrange, after much variation, had settled on national and regional teams to contest the race—he had tried all individuals and teams sponsored by bike manufacturers—and with the advent of regular teams came the team leader. Racers like Magne and Leducq would be paced and aided—with water, food, wheels, tires, etc.—by teammates, whose goal it was to get and keep their man in the lead.

The Tour's great historian Paul Portier wrote, in *Le Tour: Histoire Complète* (1950):

> Racing by team, co-operation between teammates, self-sacrificial assistance to the leader—whom it became difficult to shake off even after an accident—meant that more and more riders finished in the peloton [the term for the main group of riders in a race]. Stages lasted six hours instead of the fifteen or sixteen of the heroic age. Cyclists no longer rode all night. The Tour was humanized.

It also got shorter. From averaging more than 3,000 miles during the 1920s, it fell to 2,800 during the 1930s. After the war it continued its decline and settled during the 1970s and 1980s to being no more than an average of 2,200 or 2,300 miles.

The Tour was also settling down as to the skills required of a racer: sprinting, climbing, and time-trialing. A good team would be composed of at least one rider who could compete with the top specialists at each discipline. Sprinting was the original skill of cycling, racers hammering the pedals to take glory at the line. It is a less useful skill in the Tour's standings as the time gaps in a mass sprint are not recorded. Climbing is where racers could gain or lose the minutes, even hours, that would decide a multi-stage race. To this was added, in 1934, the time trial, the so-called "Race of Truth," where each racer rides a set course alone against only a clock. Magne confirmed his strength by winning the very first time trial, and these stages quickly became the key to winning the Tour. In the last seven decades the Tour has been

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won by a dominant climber only four or five times; most of the victors have been dominant time trialists.

The Tour's grand men are its five-time champions: first came Jacques Anquetil (1957, 1961–1964), Eddy Merckx (1969–1972, 1974), and Bernard Hinault (1978–1979, 1981–1982, 1985). Their era closed in the mid-1980s with the rise of a more scientific and specialized sport. These were the years somewhat dominated by Greg LeMond—he probably had five victories in him, but a hunting accident robbed him of his best years—the last champion in the mold of Merckx or Hinault, but also the first of the scientific method of Miguel Indurain (1990–1994). Indurain debuted as a professional cyclist at 195 pounds, but won his first Tour weighing in at 172. A world-class athlete lost 13 percent of his body weight to compete at the highest levels.

Doping has been part of cycling from the beginning—from riders drinking copious amounts of alcohol or calling for *La Moutarde* (water bottles full of stimulants like cocaine) or *La Bomba* (amphetamines). Amphetamines dominated in the 1960s and killed Tom Simpson on Mont Ventoux in 1967. He has gone down in cycling history for two quotes: his last words as he lay dying on that bleak Provençal mountain—"Put me back on my bike"—and his summing up of a racer's attitude to drugs: "If it takes ten to kill you, I'll take nine." Jacques Anquetil put in perspective when he said "You'd have to be an imbecile or a hypocrite to imagine that a professional cyclist who rides 235 days a year can hold himself together without stimulants."

Cycling was nearly destroyed in 1999 with the *affaire Festina*. The omnipresent doping by the riders was suddenly exposed when the Festina team's soigneur (a masseur and junior doctor for the riders) was caught at the Belgian border with a trunk full of illegal, performance-enhancing drugs. The French police swooped down on various riders at the Tour. The Festina team was sacked from the race and other teams withdrew. Riders struck, stages were cancelled.

What saved the Tour, and cycling, is almost too miraculous to believe: A precociously talented and arrogant young American racer, Lance Armstrong, is felled by testicular cancer. He is told that death is likely and a return to racing impossible. He survives, rebuilds his body through the most intense training imaginable—the man weighs every bit of food he eats, in ounces—and goes on to win five straight Tours (1999–2003). It is as good a story as sport can produce. Armstrong is both a dominating climber and a champion time trialist, a combination seen before only in Merckx.

Armstrong seems clean because of his devotion to training for the Tour. The very fine British racer David Miller tells the story of ringing Armstrong on his cell phone on Christmas Day a few years back. Miller was tipsy in a bar with his mates. His call finds Armstrong riding his bike up a steep mountain. Miller's friends wonder why he is swearing a blue streak into his phone at a close friend. Miller's response: "I've just lost the Tour de France." Armstrong's dominance and his glorious pleasure in just being able to race and win rang down the curtain on the Tour's first century.

The centennial race in 2003 was itself thrilling to follow. Armstrong joined Anquetil, Merckx, Hinault, and Indurain in the five-time-winner's club, but only after as competitive a Tour as we have seen since the late 1980s. Armstrong was decisively challenged by three riders. Luck also seemed to have returned to the Tour: Armstrong narrowly avoided serious injury after a fall took one of his chief rivals from the Tour, and later survived two odd crashes to win the key stage on Luz-Ardiden. The great German Jan Ullrich finished second again after crashing during the final time-trial, his last chance to overcome Armstrong. It was a marvelous three weeks.

This summer, Armstrong will seek to do what no other champion could do: win number six. His four predecessors were all beaten by younger determined men who had seen that the king had grown weak. Armstrong may have sent that message last July. We shall know in a month.

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Letters

The Red Brigade & others

To the Editors:

I appreciated David Pryce-Jones's interest in my book *Apostles and Agitators: Italy's Marxist Revolutionary Tradition* ("Delusion & inhumanity," December 2003). In some important respects, he would have approached the subject differently from the way I did. I noted, however, that in summarizing the book he did not take exception to any of my major points. My main quarrel with his review concerns three factual errors that he makes about the Red Brigades, whose ideological pedigree in the Marxist revolutionary tradition is my principal subject. Left uncorrected, these errors would give the readers of *The New Criterion* a badly distorted impression of what the Red Brigade threat was and is.

First, Mr. Pryce-Jones mistakenly declares that the members of the Red Brigades were "almost exclusively born into privileged backgrounds." The numerous trials in the Aldo Moro murder case, about which I wrote a book in 1995, revealed that the Red Brigades recruited members and attracted supporters from every level of society. The ubiquity of the revolutionary dream in Italy gave Red Brigadism its propulsive force. At the peak of their power, they only had approximately three hundred members, but for years tens of thousands of people across Italian society supported them. Had the Red Brigades been what Mr. Pryce-Jones says they were, the Italian government could have dealt with them easily, in much the same way that the government of the United States did with the Weather Underground, a revolutionary group that more closely resembles his characterization of terrorists with privileged backgrounds. Instead, for more than a decade and to an extent unmatched by any other group of its kind in an advanced industrial society, the Red Brigades succeeded in terrorizing the upholders of Italian democracy.

Second, in stating that the Red Brigades murdered twelve hundred people, Mr. Pryce-Jones is guilty of a wild exaggeration. In fact, over the fifteen-year period of this Marxist-Leninist organization's heyday and its immediate aftermath, 1974 to 1988, they murdered no more than ninety people, a statistic that many on the left in Italy hold up as proof that the Red Brigade threat was much less serious than the government claimed. Numbers can be deceiving, even when they are used correctly. Unlike Osama bin Laden and other Islamic terrorists of today, it was never the intention of Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries, on their ascent to power, to kill large numbers of people. Lenin's slogan "Strike one to educate a hundred" is quoted in the memoir of the Red Brigade killer Patrizio Peci as the essence of the terrorist left's tactics in Italy. There was no need to kill the hundred individuals if the Red Brigades chose the one victim with Leninist precision.

Third, Mr. Pryce-Jones says that revolutionary Marxism seems to have come to an end in Italy. Recent reports from Italy about resurgent Red Brigade terrorism undercut him. In 1999, a new generation of Red Brigadists initiated a terror campaign by murdering a labor law consultant for the government, Massimo D'Antona. In

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2002, they did the same thing to another labor law consultant, Marco Biagi. In March of 2003, they killed a policeman aboard a passenger train on their way, apparently, to assassinate still a third labor law consultant. In a resolution placed on the Internet, the Red Brigades explained in strict Marxist-Leninist terms their motivation for the D'Antona and Biagi killings. Both consultants had become identified with the pro-globalization cause, which the Red Brigades condemn as an infamous capitalist plot to draw the last drop of blood from the proletariat. Recent police successes against the Red Brigades have been encouraging. Nevertheless, the capacity of Italy's still extant Marxist revolutionary culture to produce true believers remains very much in evidence.

Richard Drake
Missoula, Montana

David Pryce-Jones replies:
On page 222 Professor Drake writes that between 1969 and 1984, "More than twelve hundred people died or suffered grievous injury" in terror attacks. This sentence misled me into attributing all the casualties to the Red Brigades. I should have realized that the murders committed by other communist or fascist groups were also included in this given total.

Positive negatives

To the Editors:
In "Are emotions moral?" (January 2004), F. H. Buckley says the opposite of what he means when he says, "In the language of statisticians, the danger of false positives is greater than that of true negatives"; he means, of course, "false negatives." There is no danger whatever in true negatives.

Mark Halpern
Oakland, California

F. H. Buckley replies:
Francis Bacon was said to be the last man to know everything. But it's really Mark Halpern. He's right. Finding an innocent man guilty is a false positive; and finding a guilty man innocent is a false negative. The idea is that the common law has a libertarian bias and worries more about condemning the innocent than letting the guilty go free.

Critical indignation

To the Editors:
In his dissection of the painter John Currin in "Strange Fruit" (January 2004), James Panero quotes ironically from Peter Schjeldahl's December 15, 2003 *New Yorker* review. In the same article, Mr. Schjeldahl states that Currin's work has attracted "annoyed, but oddly compulsive, critical attention." "Annoyed" or "compulsive" do not seem to do justice to the Dean-like intensity of your enragé critic's indignation.

Weber's Law of psychophysics has been succinctly phrased by Gustav Fechner as "the sensation increases proportional as the logarithm of the stimulus intensity." Do we have here an inversion of this rule? "The artistic provocation increases as the logarithm of the critical indignation," or "the critical indignation increases exponentially as the level of artistic provocation"?

J. D. Currin
Stamford, Connecticut

What Pound translated

To the Editors:
I greatly appreciated Eric Ormsby's essay on Ezra Pound in the March 2004 issue ("The voice impersonator"), but was baffled by his suggestion that Pound had ignored Li Po in his translations from Chinese poets. The "Rihaku," that is, the poet translated in Pound's "Cathay," is none other than Li Po by his Japanese name. This is one of the great Pound eccentricities, well-known to all of his readers, which does not, of course, detract from the value of the English versions.

Stephen Schwartz
Washington, D.C.

Eric Ormsby replies:
Yes, Stephen is right, of course; the whole "Rihaku" ploy slipped my mind. It doesn't really change my main point, though; in fact, it strengthens it: why call Li Po Rihaku anyway if not to obscure his stature?

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Bork, Robert H. Olympians on the march: the courts & the culture wars, *ninth in the series "Lengthened shadows,"* May, 5

Bowman, James The Bush junta (THE MEDIA), Summer, web special;

Scandalous scandal-culture (THE MEDIA), Sept., 53;

The wages of spin *on the dishonesty of politicians* (THE MEDIA), Oct., 56;

The culture of mistrust *on "Gotcha" journalism* (THE MEDIA), Nov., 54;

The story the media missed *on the media's comparison of Iraq and Vietnam* (THE MEDIA), Dec., 80;

The mountains of instead *on Bush's critics and the clarity of hindsight* (THE MEDIA), Jan., 54;

Beast-man politics *on the absence of content in political discourse* (THE MEDIA), Feb., 61;

Bad faith, common currency *on the media's antagonism toward the government* (THE MEDIA), Mar., 63;

Root-causeism & electability *on the Democrats' meta-primary* (THE MEDIA), April, 76;

Obligations to "spin" *on Richard Clarke's changing story* (THE MEDIA), May, 53;

Not made up but unmade *on Bob Woodward's* Plan of Attack (THE MEDIA), June, 55

Buckley, F. H. His secret life *a review of* The Thurber Letters: The Wit, Wisdom, and Surprising Life of James Thurber *edited by Harrison Kinney &* Thurber Country: A Collection of Pieces About Males and Females, Mainly of Our Own Species *by James Thurber* (BOOKS), Oct., 61;

Are emotions moral? *on the necessity of emotions to criminal justice*, Jan., 28;

Reply to Mark Halpern (LETTER), June, 90

Carlin, Michael Borrowed time in the "botellón" (LETTER FROM MADRID), May, 34

Currin, J. D. Critical indignation *a reply to James Panero* (LETTER), June, 90

Dalrymple, Theodore Priez pour lui *on the case of Marie Trintignant and Bertrand Cantat* (NOTEBOOK), Sept., 77;

Reflections on the oldest profession, April, 43

Daniels, Anthony His father's son *a review of* In Praise of Nepotism: A Natural History *by Adam Bellow* (BOOKS), Sept., 65;

History by other means *on Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge* (LETTER FROM CAMBODIA), Oct., 39;

Carl Jung: The Madame Blavatsky of psychotherapy, Nov., 23;

Booker vs. Goncourt; or, when silence is a duty *on the recipients of the Booker and Goncourt prizes*, Jan., 24;

How good was Maugham? *on* Somerset Maugham *by Jeffrey Meyers*, Feb., 19;

Reflections on the black cap *on* Ultimate Punishment: A Lawyer's Reflections on Dealing with the Death Penalty *by Scott Turow*, Mar., 27;

The man who made Scouting *on* Scouting for Boys *by Robert Baden-Powell*, June, 22

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The ironies of D. J. Enright *on the author's life and work*, Nov., 30;
John Clare: freedom & enclosure *reviews of* "I am": The Selected Poetry of John Clare *by John Clare, edited by Jonathan Bate* & John Clare: A Biography *by Jonathan Bate* (Books), Dec., 93;
The Steiner school *a review of* Lessons of the Masters *by George Steiner* (Books), Jan., 73
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Eaton, Charles Edward The work of the sun (Poem), Oct., 38
Epstein, Daniel Mark The Comédie-Française, Gauguin & Botticelli (Letter from Paris), Dec., 57

Franklin, James Too many universes *a review of* Are Universes Thicker Than Blackberries? *by Martin Gardner* (Books), Sept., 68;
Reasonable science *a review of* Defending Science–Within Reason: Between Scientism and Cynicism *by Susan Haack* (Books), Nov., 70

Gardner, James The victory of Posidippus *on the poetry of Posidippus of Pella* (Notebook), Oct., 78
Garner, Richard Messages from the gods *a review of* Greek Gods, Human Lives: What We Can Learn From Myths *by Mary Lefkowitz* (Books), Jan., 66
Gibson, Eric Exhibition note *on* Jean-Antoine Houdon: Sculptor of the Enlightenment *at the J. Paul Getty Museum* (Art), Dec., 70
Gioia, Dana Elizabeth Bishop: from coterie to canon *on Elizabeth Bishop's legacy*, April, 19
Grassi, Marco In the kitchen of art, Dec., 23
Greenberg, Martin Giovanni Verga's verismo *on the fiction of Giovanni Verga*, May, 18
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Gross, John Saddam fiddles as Tony burns (London journal), Summer, web special;
The art of getting in touch (London journal), Dec., 54
Gross, Paul R. Darwinizing politics *a review of* Darwinian Politics: The Evolutionary Origin of Freedom *by Paul H. Rubin* (Books), Mar., 74;
Race: no such thing *a review of* Race: The Reality of Human Difference *by Vincent Sarich & Frank Miele* (Books), April, 86

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Jacobs, Laura Stromanizing *on the choreography of Susan Stroman* (Dance), Mar., 47
Justice, Donald A chapter in the life of Mr. Kehoe, fisherman (Poem), Feb., 41

Kagan, Frederick W. The art of war, *third in the series "Lengthened shadows,"* Nov., 4
Kimball, Roger "Realism coloured by poetry": rereading John Buchan, Sept., 16;
Friends of humanity?, Nov., 17;
The rape of the masters, Dec., 28;
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Kolakowski, Leszek Leibniz & Job: The metaphysics of evil & the experience of evil, Jan., 18
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The "Blue Rider" imbroglio *a review of* Schoenberg, Kandinsky, and the Blue Rider *at The Jewish Museum* (Art), Dec., 68;
America–c'est moi! Alfred Kazin on American literature *a review of* Alfred Kazin's America: Critical and Personal Writings *by Alfred Kazin, edited by Ted Solotaroff* (Books), April, 81

Lal, Deepak The great imperialist *a review of* Curzon: Imperial Statesman *by David Gilmour* (Books), Feb., 75
Lewis, Michael J. The art of art history *a review of* Art: A New History *by Paul Johnson* (Books), Nov., 67;
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The quiet German? *a review of* A Sad Affair *by Wolfgang Koeppen* (Books), Mar., 77
Logan, William Out on the lawn *reviews of* Nine Horses *by Billy Collins,* Departure *by Rosanna Warren,* The Selected Poems of Howard Nemerov *by Howard Nemerov, edited by Daniel Anderson,* The Perishing *by Sherod Santos,* Blue Hour *by Carolyn Forché* & The Love Bomb, and Other Musical Pieces *by James Fenton* (Verse chronicle), Dec., 85;
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The mystery of Marianne Moore *reviews of* The Poems of Marianne Moore *by Marianne Moore, edited by Grace Schulman* & Becoming Marianne Moore *by Marianne Moore, edited by Robin G. Schulze* (Books), Feb., 66;

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London, Herbert I. Evocations *a review of* Tributes: Personal Reflections on a Century of Social Research *by Irving Louis Horowitz* (BOOKS), Jan., 75
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Martin, Charles The three voices of contemporary poetry *on private, prophetic, and reciprocal voices in contemporary poetry*, April, 35
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Meaney, Tom Made in myth *a review of* The Locrian Maidens: Love and Death in Greek Italy *by James M. Redfield* (BOOKS), June, 84
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Naves, Mario Suprematism at the new! improved! Guggenheim *a review of* Kazemir Malevich: Suprematism *at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York* (ART), Summer, web special
Nelson, Christopher B. Homer and the power of men that have chests (NOTEBOOK), Nov., 78
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New York chronicle *reviews of the annual Richard Tucker Music Foundation concert, David Robertson, Pierre-Laurent Aimard, Marcello Viotti, Stephen Hough & Deborah Voigt at the New York Philharmonic* (MUSIC), Jan., 47;
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New York chronicle *reviews of* Werther *at the Met*, The Barber of Seville *at the Met*, Peter Grimes *by the London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus at Avery Fisher Hall*, Boris Godunov *at the Met & Thomas Hampson's master class at Carnegie Hall* (MUSIC), Mar., 58;
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A bake sale in Texas *on "affirmative action" and the price of cookies at Southern Methodist Univ.*, Oct., 2;
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Relieving man's estate *on* Beyond Therapy *and* Being Human *published by the President's Council on Bioethics*, Feb., 1;

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A stupid party *on the liberal domination of the academy*, March, 1;
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"Neville again" *on the Madrid bombings and Spain's capitulation to terrorism*, April, 1;
It's always worse than you think *recent examples of cultural degradation from the UK and US*, April, 2;
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Pursuing moral equivalence *on the scandal at Abu Ghraib*, June, 1;
Melvin J. Lasky, 1920–2004, June, 3;
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Smith, Patrick J. Sweeping out the cobwebs *a review of* A History of Russian Music: Kamarinskaya to Babi Yar *by Francis Maes* (BOOKS), Summer, web special;
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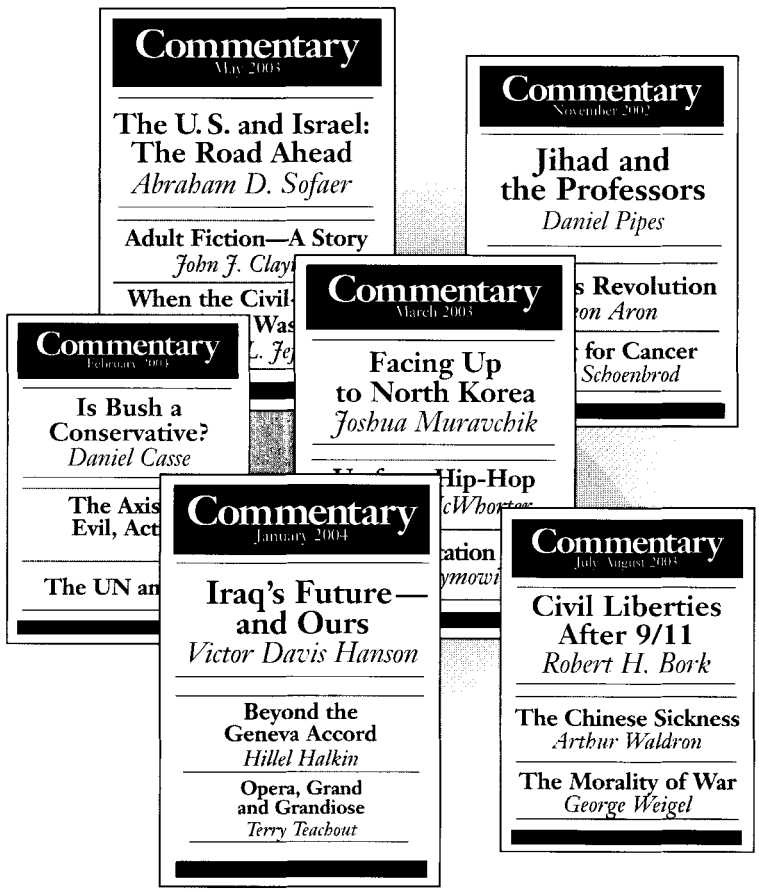

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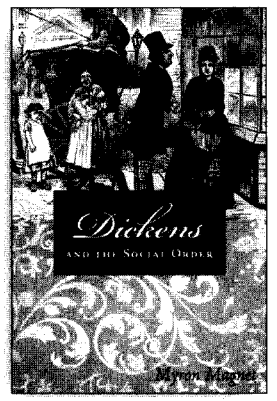

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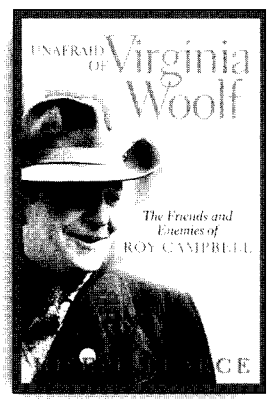

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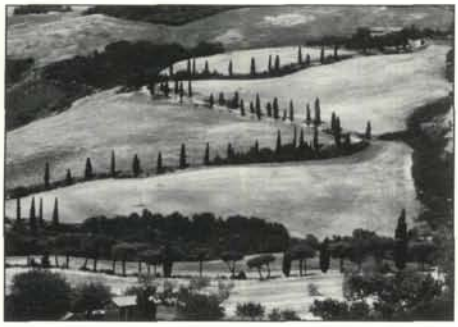

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